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THE VIOLIN-PLAYER.

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THE VIOLIN-PLAYER.

A Novel.

BY

BERTHA THOMAS,

AUTHOR OF 'PROUD MAISIE,' 'CRESSIDA,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

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THE VIOLIN-PLAYER.



CHAPTER I.

ADVENTURES ARE TO THE ADVENTUROUS.

EMANUEL CUSCUS—a notable name in every capital, from St. Petersburg to New York—had sprung from nothing to affluence and eminence, thanks entirely (so he modestly told you) to his singular talent for doing without sleep—a virtual physical indifference as to how, when, or whether he took his rest—which gave him incalculably the start of his fellow-creatures. What he lacked in power he more than made up in time.

As a youth—a youth of low degree—his golden dreams had always been of rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty, whose doings he read chronicled in the news-

papers, and with the stage heroes and heroines whom he beheld from the top gallery of a theatre. As a man, if ever man could say, '*Je ne suis pas la rose, mais j'ai vécu avec elle,*' that man was Cuscus; only for '*la rose*' read rather '*le laurier,*' the rustling of whose leaves was dearer to him than all the rosebuds in 'the rosebud garden of girls.' Even his ambition was chiefly of the head. The emotional part was steady, not impetuous; warming, not consuming; and the desire of his life had come in for slow, but complete gratification. At fourteen he had swept out a Jew broker's-shop at Frankfort; at forty he was on easy terms with all the big stars in the musical and dramatic firmament, and could boast of personal acquaintance with most of the crowned heads in Europe. But his own head was that of a philosopher, and not to be turned by greatness. A dauntless effrontery, utter freedom from pride, a fair aptitude for business,

an expert's faculty for judging of emotional art, secured him in his present position—that of as successful a speculator in talent as ever started.

In person the great manager was insignificant itself—short, with foxy-red hair and beard; a common type enough. His uncommon acuteness betrayed itself in two points only,—the quick precision of his movements, and the almost uncomfortable alertness of his eye.

Emanuel Cuscus sat awaiting the gathering together of his 'staff' for rehearsal in the *salotto* of his Milanese villa. He had several villas, though very little leisure to spend in them. There was one at Florence, where he had a wife and children, but he hardly ever found time to get there.

Opposite him was Mdlle. Linda Visconti, who had wasted the last half-hour in trying to *finesse* out of him higher terms for her services. For Cuscus, like all great men,

could be bold in season—risk large sums, lose them now and then, without flinching. None could drive harder bargains; none, when bent on securing an artist's coöperation, be more lavish. Now Linda had come armed with a rival offer from a Moscow theatre director, and talked in grand general terms of its liberality. You may blind a lynx by throwing dust in its eyes, but never Emanuel Cuscus. As a friend, disinterestedly, he advised her to accept that engagement and throw him over, deploring his inability to outbid the Muscovite. As if he did not know he had done so already! In his pocket-book he had a note of the exact terms—lower than his own—offered by Russia to Mdlle. Visconti, and that for playing third to two singers greater than herself; whereas in his concert-troupe, 'Regina,' as she was playfully called by her friends in the profession, would have no vocal rival to dread.

Surmising how the land lay, Linda now began to hint at a fear lest the Russian climate might affect her voice unfavourably. She must take medical advice about it, she said. Cuscus politely begged her not to hurry. He had learnt the parasite's first lesson: how to win a victory without showing it. Confident that he would hear from her to-morrow morning that the doctors had forbidden her to go to Moscow, and that she closed with his terms, he dropped the subject forthwith, and amused her by a comic account of the misadventures he had met with in forming his present company. An American Barnum had treacherously bribed away the crack German pianist, who was to have been the leading instrumental attraction. 'The Yankee will be bankrupt, and the German won't get paid,' prophesied Cuscus calmly; 'but this won't help me. For that I must rely upon Mdlle. Therval, whom I providentially

found disengaged at the eleventh hour. I've always had the greatest confidence in Providence. Last, but not least'—(quickly dropping this subject also, for Cuscus had too much tact to go on singing the praises of one lady to another)—'I have been disappointed of my *basso*, Grundstein, —you know him, a man on whom I had relied as on myself!' Only those who knew Cuscus could feel the full force of the illustration. Grundstein was one of those 'useful' people whose artistic vocation is to replace their 'indisposed' betters, and thus to be for ever meekly reminding the public that half a loaf is better than no bread. Singers that never have sore-throats, or mysterious disappearances, or sulky fits. But even such are human, and what must this Grundstein do but go and get laid up with malaria fever! Some weeks must now elapse before he could join. 'I got the news yesterday,' concluded Cuscus, 'and he's an-

nounced to sing to-night. But Providence again! a timely substitute chanced to be at hand, volunteered his services, and, *apropos*, here he comes. Mdlle. Visconti, let me present to you my friend Herr Tristan.'

A second-rate baritone's deputy, name unknown to fame, neither young nor good-looking, extremely short-sighted, and shy and awkward in proportion, was not, in Miss Linda's opinion, worth squandering courtesy and graces upon. She gave him a cool nod, and turned away to chat affably with the accompanist, who had just walked in,—her old friend Erlanger, ex-professor of singing at Bleiburg, unchanged in every point, these ten years—the same blending of vulgar human good looks with curious resemblance to the higher apes that had won him from his intimates the nickname of the 'Missing Link.'

Other members of the concert-party

came dropping in. The room was soon a Babel of French, German, English, and Italian. Artists are Jacks-of-all-tongues if masters of none. In the midst of the din, Cuscus suddenly slipped away. From the window he had seen Mdlle. Therval arrive, and she was met on the doorstep by the *impresario*, who detained her for a few instants in the verandah in private conversation.

However, almost before he was missed by his flock he reappeared among them, escorting the new member.

‘You all know each other, I think,’ he said carelessly, ‘except,’ looking sharply around for his deputy-baritone—‘Tristan, let me present you to Mdlle. Therval.’

The melancholy *basso* bowed a melancholy bow. Laurence coloured faintly, visibly embarrassed. But Cuscus drew off the attention of the rest by giving the signal for business to commence.

Two or three vocal pieces were first gone through. The singers were now free to disperse, but seemed in no hurry to do so. It was known that Laurence had come to rehearse with the accompanist, and there was a general curiosity to hear her as she raised her bow. It was a critical moment for Herr Cuscus. Once, once only, and that long ago, had he been a witness of her performance, and chiefly on the strength of that two-years-old impression he had already staked a very large sum! A bold stroke, even for him, and that nothing could justify but success. Trader that he was, from scalp to sole, no wonder he listened acutely. Would it be strong enough, and broad enough, to take the million, as the million can only be taken, by storm? And would it, withal, be finished and faultless enough to win over the suffrages of connoisseurs? Cuscus was not demonstrative, and when by and by he

found himself involuntarily tapping his hands together, he noted it as a hopeful sign; though some qualifying phrases hovered on his lips. 'Highly nervous temperament. Too thin-skinned.' But pachyderms cannot play the violin; or if they did, would soon cease to be pachyderms, and find their susceptibilities alarmingly developed. 'Provided she doesn't break down, I've made a good bargain,' was his ultimatum. But, to do him justice, he was not thinking entirely of his purse. Already he felt rising a sort of patriotic, professional interest in the young player, and would have sacrificed some pecuniary advantage for the honour and glory of being the first to introduce her to various of his 'publics.'

So far Herr Cuscus. Linda, meantime, was twisting about on the sofa impatiently; the risings of jealousy made Regina feel distantly uncomfortable. No one was pay-

ing any attention to her. All were listening intently, from the director down to the foundling bass, in whose eye there twinkled a tear.

The new recruit seemed to feel decidedly ill at ease in the circle of strangers, most of whose manners were certainly not calculated to set bashful souls at their ease. Directly the rehearsal was over he took leave; and the door had hardly closed upon him when a merciless volley of satire burst on all sides, directed at the absent one.

‘Cuscus, my dear,’ said Linda, as she arranged her shawl before the mirror, assisted by the Missing Link, ‘where, in the name of all that’s frightful, did you fish up that strange personage?’

‘I did not fish for him, Regina. He dropped from heaven, as I told you, just when I wanted him,’ replied the director.

‘If he was dropped from heaven, it was

because the angels found him *de trop*,' said Erlanger, who set up for a wit. 'That sort are in the way everywhere. Such an awkward figure, with a face like a long sermon, and a determination of red to the nose. May one ask your object in taking him on?'

'To be a foil to our Missing Link,' returned Cuscus; and Erlanger laughed. Erlanger was always laughing, just as other people wink. He had the whitest of teeth. 'Not to mention yourself, Regina, Beauty and the Beast look well on the platform together. It gives dramatic interest to the duet.'

'His hands seemed so painfully in his way,' observed Linda, still parroting before the glass. 'One longed to give him something to do with them—tea or coffee to hand round. Do you think he has been a waiter?'

'I can tell you all about him,' said

Erlanger facetiously. 'He was a Jew dealer—by name Benoni—son of sorrow—otherwise Tristan. Having failed in business he has adopted the musical profession for pleasure, and is going to fail there.'

'He is an enthusiast,' said Cuscus scientifically, 'who only wants a touch of talent to do really well.'

'His voice, too, is a mere thread,' affirmed the tenor of the troupe, a short, stout gentleman, with a powerful organ. 'No, my dear Cuscus. Your acumen is at fault for once. I cannot compliment you on this acquisition.'

'Pooh! it is only for the first few weeks,' returned Cuscus; 'he will get through, *tant bien que mal*, and then he may go and make a *fiasco* somewhere else.'

There was a chorus of discontent.

'We want no *fiascos*. It throws dis-

credit on the others,' said Linda, with dignity.

'I observe that Mdlle. Therval is silent,' said Erlanger. 'Can it be possible that the bass of the sorrowful countenance—'

'Has made a conquest already,' chimed in Linda. 'I shouldn't wonder.'

'Nor I, if he makes one more before his engagement is up,' returned Cuscus significantly. "'*Rira bien qui rira le dernier*," and there are some people—'

'Emanuel, now you are going to be impertinent.'

'Nay, Regina, the impertinence is in your own ears,' returned the imperturbable director. '*Au revoir, amici*; at the *Sala filarmonica*, you know, *um acht Uhr, précises*.'

Not many hours afterwards, Cuscus's carriage, with Cuscus in it, called to take Mdlle. Therval to the concert-hall. The director was full of attentions to the young

stranger, his latest *protégée*, and made himself as agreeable as the limitations imposed by his Creator allowed. It was his way to attach himself to rising greatness, as the cheapest and surest mode of getting betimes into the good books of the great, and of her future eminence he felt rarely sanguine.

It was more than Laurence herself did at that moment. Could Cuscus have seen into her mind, his own would have been seriously disturbed. A sudden new danger threatened her to-night. Nervelessness—the artist's ghostly enemy—it chilled and paralysed her mortally. Something—call it mettle, pluck, what you will—had deserted her. She missed it, and felt as if every one else must miss it in her too, and in equal measure. She was overwhelmed by a presentiment of disaster, a forecast of failure or deserving to fail, at the very point when to fail would be most fatal to her and hers. Great Heaven, how little we reck of the

torments that artists, great and small, undergo, that we may pass a pleasant evening!

A buzz of careless voices came from the artists' room, where they found the others already assembled. Linda, enthroned in the best armchair, was a brilliant arrangement in rose-colour,—a misfortune for the contralto, who was in rose-colour likewise, an inferior arrangement. She was a young *ingénue*, of whose girlish freshness Linda was secretly afraid, and having ascertained beforehand the tint of her costume, Regina had hit on this feminine refinement of annihilation. Disconsolately the poor child surveyed her finery, or what seemed so to her when she put it on. How shabby, threadbare, and ineffective beside the cunning silken folds, the delicate flowery embroideries of her rival's array!

Linda was bewailing herself to the sympathetic ears of Erlanger, the fat tenor,

and a knot of miscellaneous *employés*. Regina had a cold; the *mistral* had affected her throat. She had not a note in her voice to-night, she declared. In driving to the hall the horse had stumbled, the carriage been nearly upset, herself quite—everything had conspired to put her out. The gentlemen were concerned and consolatory, feeding her with compliments, which Cucus declared to be the best voice-lozenges, especially if administered just before going up on the platform.

‘The first course is nearly over,’ announced the director presently, as the pianist, to whose lot it fell to play the audience into their seats, grew louder and wilder, indicating that his ‘Dramatic Fantasia’ was approaching its fifth-act agonies. ‘Are you ready, gentlemen?’ to the tenor and bass, whose duet followed next,—mere padding in the programme, alas, save to themselves; for the audience were all impatient to see

the ladies in general, the soprano singer in particular.

Linda's *entrée* was punctually signalled by loud hosannas from a *claque*, in which the audience, dazzled by the rose-colour, sweet smiles, and exquisite curtsy, soon joined.

A moment's dumb-show dialogue with Erlanger, just to whet the impatience of the spectators, and Regina set to work. Bravely she attacked a grand operatic scena, taking it by assault and demolishing it. Dash and assurance carried her through, and carried her hearers away. Cucus's impassible features relaxed into a smile at last, as she was duly recalled and encored. In the greenroom her admirers were silent; her friends exchanged head-shakings and half-whispered criticisms; and Tristan, perhaps, was but epitomising the thoughts of all when he relentlessly observed to Laurence, aside,

‘In a year she will not be able to sing any more.’

‘She is not in voice to-night,’ said Laurence.

He insisted.

‘She never will be again. Four years ago I heard her. She was steadily ruining it then. Now the mischief is done. Listen how she shuffles at the slightest difficulty; alters passages right and left.’

‘And she had the loveliest voice in the world.’

‘Yes,’ he returned mournfully. ‘Heaven sends gifts to those who can best abuse them.’

Tristan, as Cuscus had explained, and as was apparent, belonged to that luckless but numerous class of persons, musical fanatics, but indifferently equipped for the service. A half share of Linda’s natural advantages would (so he fancied) have made him a happy man. In sailed Regina,

smiling, but only half content. No one in the greenroom complimented her on her singing, only on her success.

As the moment drew nigh for Mdlle. Therval to delight the Milanese, Cuscus was horrified by her changing colour. What's wrong? thought the general, agonised.

Only that she felt her forces scattered, memory deserting, her spirit damped—quenched; and, last and worst, a dead insensibility to anything that might befall. What a mockery and make-believe was the sentiment of a profession like hers! That roomful of idlers had come, not to hear music, but to retail gossip and scandal, and furnish matter for more. And she—bound over to 'sell cheap what is most dear,' to supply passion and pathos, sweetness and sublimity, to order.

Master-hands and master-spirits, with such a fit upon them, may belie themselves,

disappoint a thousand people by breaking down, or by a temporary eclipse of all higher faculties. A lapse that may throw them back years in a minute, suddenly destroying the position barely won after half a lifetime of toil and sacrifice.

To Laurence there seemed no struggling against her doom. She was seized by an appalling sense of the fragility of the little temple of fame raised around her; a filigree erection that would fall at a wrong touch. The torrent she had crossed on a plank a thousand times in safety, because she had walked boldly, made her dizzy this once. Look down and falter, and you are lost.

Cuscuta had seen it happen, knew the signs, and his anxiety was indescribable. Laurence herself felt as if nothing short of a miracle could avert a catastrophe.

At that moment her eyes, wandering round, chanced to fall upon one of her audience; only the bass of the sorrowful

countenance, who had come to the doorway of the passage leading from the platform, to listen unmolested. Something in his expression penetrated her, called off her thoughts from herself.

He might be ridiculous, but she could not make game of him like the rest. Was it that he was unhappy? and her heart just now seemed to go out strangely to all unhappy people. Music has a mission to such ; hers had one to him. There is an incommunicable sadness beyond the help of direct pity or sympathy, and to which it is only in the power of the highest sentiments of our nature to minister. To the martyr, his religion ; to the poet, his ideal ; to the lover, his idolatry ; and to those who know that language, and can receive its revelations, music may bring the same message of divine import and mysterious consolation.

Enough. No miracle. A trifle may cause the darkness, a trifle restore the light.

A crevice opened, through which we can see the whole heaven. Among an assembly of hundreds, the girl played for one only ; secure of one heart's attention ; and surely, did the devout musician but know it, there will always, among a roomful of scoffers or careless people, be found at least one devout listener.

Cuscus breathed again ; he saw the peril was past ; still he listened with doubtful approval and shook his head.

'Puts too much of herself into her playing,' he said within himself regretfully. 'Women always do. They and their music are merged, not merely connected. If they had our strength, they would surpass us every way ; but they haven't, and their method wears them out.'

Laurence, in truth, came down from the platform victorious, but feeling that another such victory might be worse than a defeat. In her tremor she hardly

knew whether the fervent phrase of thanks breathed in her ear came really from Tristan's lips or was a mere creation of her fancy. Her success was assured, unequivocal. Each time she reappeared she was greeted by storms of applause. Linda pouted, and her thoughts began to revert to Moscow.

When the concert ended the principals still lingered in the greenroom, to hear from their director some particulars of future engagements—for next week, and the next, and the next. They were going to-morrow to Turin; but this night's success meant another performance or two in Milan on their return a fortnight later. Then came their last week in Italy, and Cuscut read out the dates—'Tuesday, Monza; Thursday, Verona; Friday, Como; and Saturday—'

'All day Saturday we shall be free,' was the general laughing rejoinder. 'What shall we do with ourselves at Como?'

There was a North Italy handbook on the table. Cuscus snatched it up, and began reading aloud:

‘Como—birthplace of the elder Pliny—a town with 20,614 inhabitants—’

His voice was drowned by a chorus:

‘We shall see enough of them in the evening at the concert. What else?’

‘Handsome drinking-fountain in the public square.’

A shout of derision greeted this announcement.

‘He takes us for horses, or sheep! Fie, for shame! and in a wine-country, too!’

‘You’re uncommonly hard to please, you people,’ remarked Cuscus, turning over the leaves. ‘Ah, now we come to something better. Excursions on the lake;’ and every one became attentive.

But before he could proceed, a diversion was excited by the intrusion of a small shy devil, bearing a magnificent bou-

quet of roses. The urchin was received by a disconcerting shower of witticisms from the gentlemen of the company.

‘Cupid, as I live!’ ejaculated Erlanger, adjusting his eyeglass. ‘Where the mischief do you come from to-night?’

‘He brings credentials—see,’ said the fat tenor jocosely, pointing to the bouquet. ‘Courage, my lad! St. Peter himself would let you in with such a passport as that.’

‘Unto which of us are you sent?’ continued the Missing Link. ‘Come, Eros, do your errand.’

Cupid, entirely out of countenance, glanced uncertainly around. He saw three ladies, but, in his confusion, no longer knew them apart. Linda, as the most brilliant, riveted his gaze, magnetised him as it were; and her obvious readiness and impatience to receive the tribute he bore, and which her eyes had appropriated immediately, drove him irresistibly to go astray, though

half-conscious of his error. Timidly he approached, wavered, and finally into her hands he delivered the nosegay.

A suppressed exclamation, not of blessing, that burst from one of the lookers-on, was heard by Cuscus alone. Cupid, aware that he had blundered ignominiously, hastily deposited a note on the table, and took to his heels amid derisive cheers. Cuscus was cramming his handkerchief into his mouth to stay his laughter. The rest were observing Linda, who was toying with her flowers with affected nonchalance.

The billet was for Cuscus, who ran his eye over it, whilst the others watched him inquisitively, Linda in particular impatient to know the contents.

‘From my friend, Baron Miramar,’ said Cuscus carelessly. ‘You may have heard of him, I daresay,—the most liberal art-patron in Italy. He has a palazzo on the Lake of Como, and I let him know we were

coming into those parts. He is sorry he himself will not be at home; but thinks if we care to see his château, we shall find it a pleasant day's excursion, and begs to throw open his house to us. I call that very kind of the Herr Baron.'

'Something for Saturday — something for Saturday,' was the unanimous exclamation. 'Is the place worth visiting? See what the guide-book has got to say about it.'

"Palazzo Miramar," read Cuscus aloud from the handy volume, "'belonged formerly to the princes of the house of Sforza; bought in 18— by an Austrian banker. Fine view on the lake. Valuable collection of musical instruments, unrivalled in Italy." Ah, yes, Miramar is a *dilettante*, and very rich.'

It was agreed on all sides they must see the palazzo.

'Write to Miramar,' said Linda coolly, for the company, 'and tell him we shall cer-

tainly come over to see his place, and his grounds, and his curiosities.'

'And eat his lunch. I suppose he'll give us lunch?' put in the tenor.

'But that we think it very strange of the owner not to receive us in person.'

'For that "we," meaning Mdlle. Visconti, are dying to make the owner's personal acquaintance,' said the director calmly, as he put on his coat. 'There's hope yet, Regina. He who sent those flowers cannot be a thousand miles off.'

'How I should like to box your ears!' said Linda, rising quickly. 'Hold your tongue, please, or at any rate hold my bouquet whilst I put on my shawl; and send Tristan or somebody to see if my carriage is there.'

CHAPTER II.

MIRAMAR : A PAGE OF A MANAGER'S DIARY.

WHEN Cuscus, some thirty years hence, publishes his 'Recollections,' from materials accumulating in a journal he keeps for the purpose, he will make a piquant chapter out of a certain excursion to Miramar, on the Lake of Como. He foresaw that, and was careful to jot down in his memory the little incidents of the day, the laughable misadventures that befell, the practical jokes, the *bons mots* spoken, and so forth, from the moment when his party left their hotel, up to the unexpected *dénouement* which deprived him of two members of his troupe at once.

'Three weeks over'—(he wrote in his diary the night before)—'without a *fracas*. It is the calm before the squall. Come it must, as I knew when I found I had got

two queen bees in my hive. They always fight till one is killed. Mdle. Therval is not jealous or vindictive, I begin to think; but one is quite enough to make a quarrel, whatever people may say, when that one is a jealous woman.

‘Our *Suonatrice* carries all before her, including our own party, for no one grudges her her success. Stranger still, it doesn’t seem to elate her—more’s the pity. I consider a dose or two of self-conceit quite an essential stimulant in our profession. O these women! Always in extremes! Either they make us blush for human nature, or—nothing will satisfy them but they must be too good for this world.

‘Regina sings more and more out of tune, but her dimples and dresses bring down the house sometimes. She regularly embraces Mdle. Therval every night, to show us all that she isn’t jealous. Her amiability surprises every one: I only know

the cause. She scents a mystery, and has cast herself for the part of the heroine. Heaven forgive me! I am partly to blame for her delusion. Hints I dropped about great personages in disguise—princes turned wandering minstrels, in order the more easily to approach the object of their affections—put her on the track. I meant to mystify her only; but Regina went and appropriated the allusions, just as she appropriated the bouquet meant for Mdlle. Therval. She has a perfect kleptomania for attentions. She has become quite polite to Tristan; she no longer complains of having to sing duets with him, and is stone-blind to it that he is stone-deaf to the wiles of the siren. She has given the others to understand that she is the cause of his melancholy, and they laughingly condole with her on her conquest. The comedy of errors approaches its climax.

‘Our basso has not betrayed himself

yet. He gets through with his singing, and holds his peace, for the most part, at other times ; but I suspect he has already had enough of Bohemian life, and the manners and customs of some of us are a sore trial to his fastidious nerves. When Mdlle. Visconti conveys peas into her mouth with her knife, when the unblushing Erlanger cracks the most astonishing jokes for our edification over the dinner-table, his eyes seek out Mdlle. Therval with a joint compassion and devotion that is really touching.'

* * * * *

'The sun shone bright for us that memorable morning. Every one was in good spirits, of course. We always must be in good spirits ; it is forbidden us to think about the clouds of yesterday or to-morrow. Regret and anxiety are the heavy luggage of life, and artists must leave it behind, if they are to do their duty properly, which is

to help other people to forget their cares. There were plenty of serious tourists on board the steamer from Como that morning, with guide-books, waterproofs, and solemn countenances and well-regulated minds. We noticed how bored they looked. They stared with astonishment at our party, who never seemed to want for something to talk and laugh about. Presently an Englishman came sauntering towards us, I suppose to pick up some crumbs of amusement. Erlanger was at his pleasantries as usual, now mimicking the captain of the boat, his walk, swagger, his peculiar habit of igniting a match on his trousers; now bantering the peasants, of which there were numbers on board, and speculating on the probable contents of their large baskets. One old woman volunteered to open hers for him, and out sprang a large bird with clipped wings—an owl, she said—which she used her utmost eloquence to persuade him to buy.

The son of Albion soon had enough of us, and rejoined his mamma and sisters under the awning.

The palazzo Miramar overlooks the lake, and stands but a few paces from a little landing-place. It is not shown to visitors, and no tourists came on shore at the pier but ourselves.

‘About as like a barn as a palazzo,’ observed Erlanger critically, as we strolled up to the entrance. ‘Just a handsome stone balcony, a screen to hide the pasteboard house behind.’

‘But the situation is good,’ Regina observed soothingly. Ah, if she were the owner of the place, or had a voice in the matter, she would turn it into a very paradise of pleasure; and she went on naively to describe to Tristan the improvements she would introduce into the external arrangements of house and garden.

An old housekeeper stood on guard in

the doorway, evidently prepared for the incursion. She received us with some ceremony, offered us refreshment, and then escorted us leisurely over the first and second floors.

‘Poor relation of the Baron’s,’ said Erlanger, aside, to Mdlle. Therval. ‘Puts her in charge here. Gives her a home and saves himself a servant. Charity and economy combined. Clever! Cuscus, what are you laughing at?’

‘She must be under orders from her master, or cousin, or whatever he is,’ whispered our tenor, ‘to treat us so civilly. Never in my life before have I been well received by a single woman in charge of an empty house.’

‘Do you hear what he says?’ caught up Erlanger the incorrigible. ‘Never in his life before has he been well received by a single woman in charge of an empty house!’ And our *primo amoroso*, who is always

boasting of his conquests off the stage, was overwhelmed with malicious condolences.

I saw nothing worth noticing in the first two stories of the palazzo; but had we been passing through a museum of wonders we could not have examined each object, as it presented itself to our view, more gravely and carefully. It has unluckily got known among them that I keep a diary; and, on occasions of this sort, they swarm round me officiously, supplying me with facts, divers and interesting, for my journal. Not an item of the baronial furniture or lumber escaped minute scrutiny. There was Erlanger, putting on his eyeglasses to look at an old broken water-jug; our tenor delicately fingering a window-curtain of faded chintz he took for old tapestry. Only Tristan showed a decided want of interest in the details of Miramar's domestic arrangements. As to Mdle. Visconti, she ran about prying into nooks and corners

with untiring curiosity and energy, ransacking drawers, peeping behind curtains, pulling open chiffoniers and cabinets, remarking on their contents, and admiring everything promiscuously.

‘Look, look!’ she cried suddenly, in a tone of delight, pointing to a shelf in the cupboard she had thrown open to inspection. ‘The beautiful blue jar!’

‘There’s for you, Cuscus!’ they shouted with one accord. ‘Where are your tablets? Put it down. “Here we admired especially an ultramarine vase, of unique Indian ware.”’

‘What a shame! to leave it knocking about in an old cupboard!’ said Regina.

‘I shall write and tell Miramar his aunt doesn’t look properly after his belongings,’ said Erlanger languidly. ‘Take care what you’re doing, Tristan. Don’t meddle with the pottery. Who breaks, pays, you know. Miramar is a miser, I can tell that, from the look of his house.’

Our basso had laid hold of the 'vase' with no gingerly fingers, and, turning it round, displayed the label on the other side—'Lazenby, London, Pickles;' a discovery that provoked fresh mirth, and the laugh was against Mdlle. Visconti.

By this time most of us—myself for one—had quite forgotten that we had come here expressly to see a magnificent collection of musical instruments, unique in Italy, and that constituted in fact the only point of distinction between this and a score of other country houses on the lake.

We were reminded when we got up to the third story, where the treasures were kept in a small room opening upon the balcony we had admired from below. Here we found something worth the attention we gave it. The first Baron Miramar, who didn't know one note from another, had a mania for collecting instruments of music,

ancient and modern. His son, the amateur, regards this as the most valuable part of his inheritance. Mdlle. Visconti's eyes wandered about from one glass case to another, seeking for something to covet.

'If you had your choice of all these,' she began characteristically at last, 'which would you select?'

It was an *embarras de richesse* indeed, and we all found some difficulty in making up our minds. Erlanger professed himself much fascinated by an Indian flute, made of an enemy's bone. 'There's harmony out of discord for you,' he remarked admiringly. For my part, I gave the preference to a double pipe; flute and tobacco-pipe in one. Killing two birds with one stone has always had a special attraction for me. Regina was captivated by a mediæval lute, inlaid with ivory, exquisitely carved, and of a graceful shape. 'So becoming to the player,' she observed can-

didly. 'How much more picturesque than pianos and violins! Ah, I should have been an instrumentalist if I had lived in those days,' she sighed, with an arch glance at Tristan, who was watching her gravely. 'What a contrast, even to these!' she added, pointing to three Cremona violins in a separate glass case, and upon which Mdlle. Therval's beautiful wistful eyes were naturally fixed. No need to ask her where her choice would have lain. These were in fact the real gems of the collection. 'Does your master play?' asked Regina brusquely, turning to our escort.

'His Excellency is a collector,' she replied oracularly, as she unlocked the case that held the jewels.

'Collector? Dog in the manger, you mean,' rejoined Erlanger, with indignation. 'But the dog is not at home. Mdlle. Therval; suppose you take one and play for us. It would be a sin for you to pass by and not

touch: they should belong to you, by rights, not to him, the idle fool.'

The opportunity was tempting, but Mdlle. Therval seemed to hesitate. 'What would his Excellency say?' I suggested gravely.

'He'll never know,' returned Erlanger. 'You or Tristan will give the good lady a trifle to hold her tongue.' Our basso seconded the entreaties, remarking that the owner, if ever it came to his ears, could only regret that he had not been present to assist at the experiment. '*Suona, suona,*' we all cried with one consent; but as the room was too small for good acoustic effect, we stepped out on the balcony. The player stood up in the middle; we grouped around her, listening intently,—all but Regina, who was posing, as though the violin *romanza* were but the accompaniment, the soft music to her beauty and allurements, which at this very moment were understood to be break-

ing the heart of the bass of the sorrowful countenance. Herr Tristan, at the extreme end of the balcony, was looking across at her despondingly. She forgot he was short-sighted, Regina, and could not tell a beautiful woman from Emanuel Cuscus at a distance of yards.

Our *Suonatrice* played on, as artists play impromptu, seldom before a paying public—the bloom is off the peach before it gets to the market. I, Emanuel Cuscus, could be sentimental, when Beethoven is being played on a balcony by Mdle. Therval on a Cremona violin. But this time my attention was diverted by Regina's byplay with Tristan. It was very coquettish, and so upset my gravity that presently I was compelled to retreat indoors to laugh. On the balcony of the room opposite I had noticed a little staircase leading up to the flat roof, where there was a promenade—Italian fashion—set with flower-pots.

I pursued my explorations in this direction, to find myself over my companions' heads, looking down on the balcony. Mdlle. Therval had just ceased playing, and they were all applauding her. I joined in, to draw their attention to my present position; when a fresh diversion was created in the volatile minds of my party by the sight of a fine Angora cat. Regina made a dart at it; but it eluded her, and ran into the house. She gave chase; the others followed, and they went racing with a hue and cry through the dismantled chambers of the palazzo. Mdlle. Therval lingered on the balcony. Music has a dangerous power of reminiscence. What she was thinking of, as she leaned over the balustrade, pretending to watch the boats on the lake, the women washing linen on the water's brink, I could not conjecture; but presently, turning round, she saw Tristan there behind her. The Angora

chase had ended in an impromptu game of hide and seek; and he, leaving those mad-caps, had seized the opportunity to return to the balcony, and, closing the glass doors, shut himself out there with her alone.

I fancy she would have avoided the *tête-à-tête* if she could; but how could she? He had a determined look, a look that Curtius might have worn when about to leap into the gulf. There seemed to me no indiscretion in assisting in the scene. I was beginning to be interested, and a little anxious as to the result.

Tristan watched her for a minute in silence as she stood there holding the Stradivarius. Then I distinctly heard him say, with emphasis,

‘You are a happy woman.’

This, I take it, was only a roundabout way of telling her he was an unhappy man. Mdlle. Therval raised her wondering eyes;

her fingers still, with a nervous unconscious movement, ran over the dumb strings of the violin.

‘Why?’ she asked simply.

‘You are a great musician,’ said the enthusiast; ‘that should be enough for content.’

‘Some might think,’ she returned, with spirit, ‘that to have what you have, and be what you are, ought to be enough also.’

‘Is that a reproach,’ he asked despondingly, ‘for having laid aside my position and independence, that I might, for a little while, be near you?’

She shrank slightly at this confession; he resumed:

‘O, why say it? I see it in your face. What earthly pleasure can a fastidious amateur find in replacing a third-rate professional, and convincing himself how immeasurably his inferior he is on the

platform? You forget; it was a way to your presence—your daily companionship.’

She merely replied, in a tone of delicate but distinct reproach,

‘When I promised to keep the secret of your name, you assured me it was a musical experience you had set your heart on making.’

‘It was true, but not the whole truth. You have my confession now. To be with you, not merely to hear you play, but to see you smile, move, live—as your comrades might—that was what I longed for. I envied that idiot Cuscus’ (thank you, Monsieur Tristan), ‘who hands you up to the platform; I envied that dancing-master Erlanger, when he accompanies you, or turns over the leaves. Women never love like that. It is the better for them.’

Her eyes flashed, not at him, but, as it

were, at something in the distance. She turned to him now, saying firmly,

‘At that time you made me a promise—never to repeat, never again to speak of this.’

‘I remember,’ he interposed. ‘I have broken my part of the contract, and forfeit your promise to keep my secret. But the farce is over, and my adventure ends here. I do not intend even to return with you to Como. Cuscus won’t be surprised; nothing surprises him. So, as I am leaving, you will listen—for this one last time.’

I was growing seriously uneasy. I have always known my friend ‘Tristan’ for an oddity, so his fantastic idea of joining us hardly surprised me. That there was a sentimental motive at the bottom of it I have since observed; but who would have suspected him of such a serious, obstinate design, as put me in danger of having all my plans upset? His meaning, then, was nothing less than to rob me of my violin-

player by making her his Baroness! I stood aghast at the thought, which first dawned upon me now. He did not leave me in suspense another moment.

‘I have learnt to understand this at least,’ he said impressively, ‘that I was wrong to dream of asking you to give up the full free exercise of your talent in your profession, to become my wife. Forgive me for not saying in Rome, months ago, what I say now. Remain what you are, the world’s violin-player, yet let me hope. Instead of your taking my station upon you, I take yours. You and your art-interests shall be the sole object of my life. Your career may be varied and exciting, but has it not its trials too? Do you never need a companion who has the right to protect you, whose business it is to guard you from care and persecution? Does not every woman need such a one? Should not you, of all others?’

I was losing all patience as I listened to this outburst. I could have remonstrated and protested, but felt it was too late. The cursed fellow had outwitted me. It was evidently an old attachment too, and he was ready now to sacrifice anything she asked—let her name her own conditions. His proposal was that she should continue to play the violin; but once let Mdlle. Therval change her name and condition, and I had little faith in her remaining with Emanuel Cuscus. Tristan himself cannot have hung upon her answer with more painful eagerness. She spoke so low as to be inaudible, but it was superfluous. Her look, accent, gesture, told me all; and in Tristan's countenance I had further proof, had I wanted it, in its fixed melancholy as he listened. I breathed again, and lit a cigarette. Poor Tristan! I must say he bore his fate very well, and did not seem so surprised as I was.

‘Let me tell you something,’ he resumed presently, with the astonishing fluency silent people show in an emergency, when the ice is once broken. ‘You will never love a man of these Bohemians—these vagabond adventurers.’ (Thanks again, my friend; you shall pay for this.) ‘You may herd with them, eat with them, be classed with them, friends with them, and adored by them: it can go no further. They feel, and you feel, there is a barrier between you, they will never pass.’

To this she returned no answer.

‘I think of that,’ he said, ‘and am no more jealous of these associates of yours; for I say to myself that, whatever I may be to you now, I could never have been more than a comrade, were I the poor singer I have so often wished myself. Was there truth in that?’

She evaded his question. Her voice

trembled a little, then grew clearer, as she answered,

‘I cherish my liberty. I should not make a good wife to you. I see now I am never to live but for music.’

‘You are divine,’ he exclaimed suddenly, ‘and I most undeserving of you. I will live to become more worthy of what I knew all the while was only a mad dream, and which I now give up, entirely and for ever at your command.’

She took the hand he offered, saying,

‘And if I ask you to keep your word and part from us at once—it is for a reason—I think—I fear all this is doing mischief.’

‘My adventure ends here,’ he said, raising her hand to his lips.

A low laugh from inside the room startled them, as it did myself. The laugh was Regina’s. Middle. Therval quitted the balcony instantly. The window had been closed during their dialogue, so Regina

can merely have been an ocular witness of the scene. I alone was in a position to give a full and true account of what had passed, and I confide only in these pages.

But Regina had seen enough thoroughly to put her out of temper. She feigned *insouciance* ; but I saw the storm blowing up at last that I had apprehended. I hastened to descend from my perch and rejoin them. Tristan, as I anticipated, got me aside for a private interview, which was soon concluded, to our mutual satisfaction. He is really a most superior man, both as to culture and generosity, one with whom it is a pleasure to have to deal, and Mdlle. Ther-val's insensibility to his advances is totally inexplicable to me.

The return steamer was now approaching the pier. I had forgotten the hour, and caught sight of the funnel barely in time to summon my stray sheep together—urging all to fly, unless they wished to lose

the boat. We made a rush for the landing, and in the flurry the secession of one among us was not noticed.

Only when we had got safely on board, a mere instant before the steamer started, it was perceived that the butt of the party was missing.

‘Where’s Tristan? What has become of him?’

‘Jumped into the lake to take singing-lessons from the mermaids,’ said Erlanger, peering over the sides of the steamer.

‘Or stayed behind to make love to the civil housekeeper,’ suggested the tenor. ‘Great Heavens! I said so. Look, look! There he is, on the balcony!’

The steamer was passing before the windows. There above, sure enough, stood our ex-basso, leaning over the parapet, and making friendly signs.

‘He is speaking to us. Hark! What does he say?’

The air was quite calm, and his utterances were distinctly heard by every one as we gathered in a group :

‘Baron Miramar thanks his friends, and wishes them good-night.’

The steamer swept by. Erlanger, the tenor, the contralto, were gaping with surprise. I interchanged amicable signals and farewells with our friend in the balcony, and Mdle. Therval vouchsafed him a parting smile. I glanced at Regina. She was looking dangerous. However, she controlled herself so far as to put a good face on the matter for the next few hours. Little else but the adventure was talked of for the remainder of the evening. Erlanger pronounced it a very pretty one. But Mdle. Therval has made herself an enemy for life.

The next morning I received a communication from Regina. She wished to break her contract, which, on certain terms, it was open to her still to do. She had

finally determined not to cross the Alps with us, having on reflection made up her mind in favour of the Russian.

‘O, the green-eyed monster!’ I sighed. ‘I have seen a good deal of him, and he is generally in the way. But for once he has done me a service. Mdlle. Visconti goes. I do not want her, and she was getting troublesome. Mdlle. Therval stays. I cannot spare her. And she has declined to become Baroness Miramar. Good for Emanuel Cuscus!’

CHAPTER III.

THE ICE-QUEEN.

It was in March. The Breretons, who—to quote from a county gossip chronicle recently sprung into existence—had been ‘starring’ at the West-end during the winter season, were down at Hawkwood for the recess, recruiting respectively from the fatigues of business and of pleasure.

What *was* Brereton’s business? At least a standing joke among his friends at the club. He talked gravely of his affairs and engagements, conscientiously believing in their importance, and considered himself very hard-worked. Well, he was president of one society, and on the committee of two or three more. But he contrived habitually

to invest the minutest actions of his life with the dignity of business. He read the paper as though a good deal depended on whether he got through it or not; addressed himself to write a note or pay a call as though to the despatch of a public duty, bringing to the performance of the task the same punctuality, circumspection, and care not to commit himself, as though the fate of nations were involved. Then, with a grateful sense of having well earned his repose, he came down to Hawkwood, hunted a little, shot a good deal, and entertained the county gentry.

His wife was not beloved by the latter. She was too proud. Fortunately for her, she was feared also. People spoke ill of her respectfully and with reserve. 'Foreign ways' was the favourite charge against her; which meant merely that she dressed well, and eschewed a few ancient Hampshire fashions in some of her household arrange-

ments. And no one was more noticed, run after, and, in the main, respected, than the lady of Hawkwood. A coquette, indeed! The ill-natured slander fell dead in her presence. He must be bold or blind who tries to break through that surface of proud cold indifference. Rightly had Val, in his heart, surnamed her the Ice-Queen. He knew her better than most. Yet between the extremes of heat and cold we find it sometimes hard to distinguish.

It was Easter—a gay season, as gaiety goes in Hampshire. But the Ice-Queen was bored—Sir Adolphus perceived it one morning at breakfast, as he was thoughtfully peeling an egg. They were alone—which was the exception at Hawkwood. They had this very day been expecting friends, who, alas, had just written to postpone their visit. It was the first morning they had breakfasted *tête-à-tête*, and Diana was bored. What was her husband to do?

Why, go out; which was what he did as soon as they rose from the table. He was no fool, Sir Adolphus.

Diana betook herself to her morning-room, an apartment on which she has expended money and taste till she is sick of success. A more amiable tabernacle is not to be seen in Hampshire. 'Not quite the proper thing,' thought the parson's wife, whose puritanical soul was scandalised by so much pleasantness between four walls. And this morning it seemed but vanity and vexation of spirit to its mistress also.

The Ice-Queen is bored. Send for a comet, an aerolite, or phenomenon of some sort, to break the monotony of existence for her. A restless striving after achievement, that never quite dies in her, becomes a torment, perhaps a danger, in vacant, inactive hours, and revives the strangest wishes and fancies in her idle brain. Pity

a Cleopatra, a Zenobia, born out of due time and in quiet English home-life.

She had something to look forward to to-day, however, something that induced her to spend the whole morning over her water-colour sketches that Mr. Romer praised so highly. Mr. Romer, of whom she had seen not a little during the winter in London, and who was expected at Hawkwood this afternoon. He had now been in England for eight months, on a visit which Diana intended not to come to an end.

Towards one o'clock she heard wheels approaching up the drive, and recognised the pretty appointments of Mrs. Damian's pony-carriage. Diana laid aside her brushes with a sigh. Death and periodical domiciliary visits from the Damians, whose little country home was within easy driving distance, were two inevitable evils it was useless to resist. And as there had been a longer interval than usual since she had

been invaded by her relations, she prepared to receive them with a good grace.

Mrs. Damian and Amy entered with a rush, the mother brimful of lively malice, her needle eyes hunting all over the room in search of something to prick.

‘Alone, my dearest Di, and industrious as ever!’ she began, with a gushing tenderness that put Di on the alert. ‘It was the happiest inspiration to come to-day. You have generally a houseful; and Amy and I, who live as quietly as mice, never think of you but as in a whirl of distractions and festivities. Tell us all you have been doing. We are perishing for some news—something to amuse us, you know.’

Her *abandon* of manner would have blinded a stranger; but Diana had almost instantly surmised the truth,—that she had come, not to hear, but to communicate tidings,—something over which she was secretly exulting.

‘What can it be?’ thought Diana satirically. ‘Has the Princess of Trebizonde proposed for her son? or Amy’s *fiancé* lost his elder brother?’

After a quarter of an hour’s discursive conversation, Mrs. Damian came out with it, as it were accidentally,

‘By the way, we bring a bit of news—good news, and that I know you will be glad to hear for our sakes.’

Diana lifted her eyes inquiringly. Mrs. Damian’s twinkled maliciously as she said,

‘Gervase.’

‘Has fortune favoured him again?’ asked Diana carelessly. ‘You don’t mean to say you have actually secured the little widow with the large jointure?’

‘Nay,’ rejoined the mother, ‘better than that. The widow was a dear little creature, but underbred—terribly underbred, you know. The long and short of the present matter is, that poor dear Otho’s unfortunate

investment seems likely to turn out well at last. You know what a wretched concern it has been. I never abandoned all hope myself; but Gervase was so convinced it was a bubble that had burst, that only the other day he was going to part with the whole thing for a mere song, when a whisper reached him to wait;’ and she proceeded to detail the unforeseen circumstances which had so worked as to convert a comparatively valueless property into a substantial source of income.

‘Fortunate indeed,’ Diana responded, sincerely this time. ‘The widow with her thousands was well enough; but I quite agree with you, that thousands without the widow is far, far better.’

‘You know me, Di,’ said Mrs. Damian impressively, ‘that I am the least mercenary person in the world. Yet I cannot express what a weight this news has taken off my mind. I don’t mind telling you now that I

have been very unhappy about him ever since he went back to Germany.'

'On what account?' she asked curiously.

'He is restless and dissatisfied. A perfect disgust for his profession seems growing upon him. He says he is sick of court cabals and petty intrigues, and that he is tired to death of being chiefly known as a leader of cotillons. The plain truth is, Di, he ought to marry. But he is so fastidious. One affair after another I have undertaken for him, and all have fallen through, as you know. Gervase will choose for himself. Now he is free to choose where he pleases.'

'Ah,' said Diana, 'even if his choice, like King Cophetua's, should fall on a beggar-maid.'

Mrs. Damian shrank aghast.

'What do you mean? Gervase marry beneath him! It would kill me. But you know how ambitious girls are in these days—or their parents for them—and Gervase

is as proud as Lucifer—think now how his position is altered for the better! If he remains in the service, it will be with surer prospects of advancement. If he leaves it, it will be to settle down. He is now a good *parti* for any woman in the world—may court and win whom he pleases.’

“‘If he can get her good-will,’” put in Diana.

‘I have never known him fail there—when it was worth the winning.’

The announcement of luncheon checked the repartees just as they threatened to become pointed. Luncheon, of course, was an important event in Sir Adolphus’s day. The story of the fortunate turn in Gervase’s affairs was told again, and the Baronet delivered himself of some laboured and effective felicitations. The topic occupied the conversation till the visitors took leave—Mrs. Damian with renewed expressions of pleasure and surprise at having found

the master and mistress of Hawkwood alone.

Simple Sir Adolphus hastened to relate how their promised guests—the Topnottes—who were sufficiently great guns keenly to interest Mrs. Damian, had been unavoidably detained by illness.

‘And Romer, whom we asked to meet them, coming this afternoon,’ he ejaculated suddenly, turning to his wife. ‘I forgot him. Dear me! how very unlucky!’

‘Mr. Romer—to meet the Topnottes!’ repeated Mrs. Damian, in a tone of infinite surprise.

‘At their particular request,’ Sir Adolphus explained. ‘The old lord contemplates some important alterations in his chapel, and wants Romer to undertake the design. But, upon my word, Diana, we should have done much better to put him off till next week,—when he must be here

to see to the setting up of his fountain,' he explained, turning to Mrs. Damian.

Diana took out her watch.

'Yes, why did we not think of it this morning?' she said carelessly. 'It is late now;' and Sir Adolphus was left comparing clocks and watches and time-tables, and making complex calculations about trains and telegrams, while the ladies exchanged affectionate adieux.

'I think Diana should be more careful whom she asks to Hawkwood,' said Mrs. Damian, slashing the pony spitefully, as she and Amy drove off. 'I hear Mr. Romer is there constantly. He gives her lessons in London. They say she is for ever at his studio, and constantly seen driving with him in her carriage.'

'I do not believe it,' said the mild Amy; 'it is only horrid gossip.'

'O, there's no accounting for tastes. I have known one or two others who had a

fancy for the society of artists and singers, and did not mind compromising themselves in that fashion. But it is very *infra dig.* ; and I never should have thought that Diana—'

'Mamma, mamma, for shame!' expostulated poor Amy, startled out of filial deference, as she not unfrequently was, by her mother's extravagances. 'How can you say such things of Diana? Why are you always so bitter against her?'

'Amy, Amy, what a little goose you are! I shall never forgive her, *never!* With a wife like that, Gervase might have been Prime Minister some day!'

Val Romer, though outside the notice of the Hampshire press, had also been 'starring' at the West-end these six months. To all appearances the artist was flourishing exceedingly. The tree knows first when something is amiss with the root.

He was in London, to give it a trial as a home, and had been treated there right royally. He was pressed with commissions, and from the highest quarters. Pleasant notoriety had turned his head a little. He seemed on his way to become the fashionable art-exponent of his generation, the spoilt child of rich people, great people, cultured people—to unite the prestige of a man of genius with that of a man of the world. A lure.

But for this he must melt himself down, to be recast in a different mould. So much he had already discovered, to his cost. The mainspring of society is self-repression; the vitality of art is self-assertion and free expansion. Among men of genius the smooth, flexible, symmetrical nature, that can find in the madding crowd a congenial, healthful element, is rare. Val was as smooth as a gnarled oak, and as flexible as its branches. His unequal nature rose to great heights

certainly, but at the expense of depression here and there. He had lapses of vacancy, irritability, and oddity—the reaction from extreme tension of the imaginative faculties—states of mental disorder, during which the effort to be pleasant and conversational cost so much as to unfit him for work the next day. Then he had a way of disappointing his patrons. The peacock was secured, a host of jackdaws were collected to come and behold; and lo, and lo, the perverse bird would not spread its tail for admiration! He must subdue these little insubordinations of spirit, if he were ever to occupy the position he dimly sighted, and that Lady Brereton wished him to occupy. His originality was of a kind to stand in his way. He must clip it and prune it and pare it. What would follow?

Why, he said to himself, that a very few more years of this, and he, Val Romer, would have sunk into a most ordinary per-

sonage, an alderman of art—growing stout and sleek—modelling flattering likenesses at fancy prices of whomsoever could afford to pay. The strong prosaic tendency in his temperament would be fostered and become dominant, the ideal element sacrificed, the kernel of his merit gone. There are those who can only give the world their best work by keeping out of the world's disturbing influence.

What wedded him to it? For one thing, a friendship there—a relation, but for which he might have thrown up the game as soon as begun, simply because the new atmosphere disagreed with him, and the process of acclimatisation was unpleasant.

Some such thoughts were coursing through his mind as he drove from the station to Hawkwood.

'Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?'

Well, well, he was invited to meet the

Topnottes: the most enlightened, as well as the most liberal, of art-patrons; and he was to superintend the placing of his fountain—no need to inquire further into motives.

Hawkwood was a house exactly to Val's mind—not large or showy, but solid and comfortable—a house built to live in, not to look at. Coming out of the chill evening air, he thought the warm hospitable-looking hall a goodly sight. He was ushered into the drawing-room—a picture of English comfort and un-English elegance combined—where Diana sat, bending over a novel, raising her head quickly, as the guest was announced.

‘Ah, Mr. Romer!’—with an accent of surprise that took him aback.

‘What! Did you not expect me?’ he rejoined. ‘I wrote—’

Diana, smiling faintly at his incorrigible simplicity, interposed reassuringly, extending her hand,

‘O yes, we expected you. Only one disappointment always prepares one for a second; and I am sorry to say our other friends have failed. The Topnottes cannot come.’

Val expressed his disappointment more unreservedly than Diana thought strictly courteous; but such subtleties were beyond him. He took a chair by the fire, facing her.

‘Any news?’ she asked presently. ‘Arrivals from London are always supposed to come laden with intelligence.’

Val had an evening paper, which he at once produced. Men are so literal. The items of news it furnished did not seem to interest Lady Brereton in the slightest degree. Women are so perverse.

They thawed by degrees as they sat there in the firelight, Val staring at the crackling logs, glancing at intervals at his hostess.

‘Spring is cold in the country, is it not?’

she said presently. 'Are you sighing for Rome and the Villa Marta?'

'The poor Villa Marta!' he ejaculated; 'it seems very far off to me now.' Farther off, somehow, just then than heaven or hell.

'The lemon-groves and cypresses and marble columns,' she said, with a little shiver. 'Don't you long for them?'

'Not at this moment, not on a cold day,' he replied, warming his hands over the logs.

'When do you go back there?'

'It is let till July,' he said evasively.

'Ah! Sometimes I fear you have had enough, or too much, of England—of London—already,' she insinuated gently.

'It is too noisy for me,' he confessed, after a pause. 'I like to have plenty of room—room to think.'

'I understand,' she said. 'You mean the circle is too large, the crowd of thoughtless commonplace people thronging round.

you, to whom you are indifferent. But, after all, what does it signify how large may be the *outside* ring of one's acquaintances? They never really come near one. And the *inner* circle—of people who can really affect one's happiness—is everywhere and for everybody very small indeed. Whether in London or Rome, it is limited to a few.'

'Very true.'

'It seems to me,' she continued, talking fluently, frankly, to put him at his ease, 'that no amount of mere additions to one's visiting-list has any real effect on one's life, no more than fifty more or less in a theatre can matter to the actor in a play. But with the inner circle of friends that I spoke of it is different. Any addition to that makes an epoch in one's life, like the discovery of a new little world,' she concluded playfully, rising and crossing to the window, Val watching her graceful movements admiringly, as she leaned out, listening for the

tread of her husband's horse. She had just caught the sound coming up the drive.

Then she returned to her seat, and flashed a look across at her guest, saying,

‘Do you not think so?’

‘Yes. An epoch, for good or evil.’

‘You are very cautious,’ she said. ‘As for me, I don’t forecast the worst that may happen. A new world or a new acquaintance may have perils. I could forget them in the charm of adventure and discovery.’

The occurrence together of Sir Adolphus and the dressing-bell left Diana with the last word of the dialogue, over which Val puzzled agreeably for the next half-hour.

Dinner was less smooth sailing. Diana had asked a few friends, of the ‘outer ring’—the clergyman and his wife, a retired officer, an invaluable fellow-sportsman for Sir Adolphus on his shooting expeditions—good-natured people, always ready to officiate as padding, slyly nicknamed ‘Adelphi guests’

by the Breretons, but needed to-night to harmonise the circle. Sir Adolphus and Val did not 'get on.' The sculptor depreciated the ex-civil servant, whose merits he set off to the worst advantage. Feeble as a wit, faded as a beau, the host, contrasted with that piece of organic energy opposite, looked like a Roman patrician of the decadence entertaining his Visigoth conqueror. Sir Adolphus talked platitudes. Val hated them, and, forgetting himself, would come out with a set-down that would have taxed another's good-nature severely. But Sir Adolphus's was infinite, and he looked tolerant, feeling one must make allowance for Romer.

Val, whilst dressing, had made fifty good resolutions. He would talk little, not lay down the law at all, give in to Sir Adolphus when he could, and, when he could not, maintain a dignified reserve. Why must the parson introduce the subject of

politics? Sir Adolphus talked like a well-informed dullard; Val, like a clever ignoramus, which is as much as to say he got the worst of it. Sir Adolphus confounded him with statistics, appealed to 'well-known' facts Val had never heard of in his life, referred to reports, Blue-books, correspondence, intrenched himself on ground whither Val could not follow him, or followed floundering helplessly. Irritated and unconvinced, he rushed into exaggeration and paradox. Easy now for the other to put him down with a word or forbearing silence, and the humiliating condescension one shows for a big baby.

Diana came to the rescue, with a phrase or two, giving a playful satiric turn to the subject; delighting her husband with her wit, forcing Val to smile, inclining both to follow her lead to safer ground. Not content with restoring good-humour, she insensibly led round the conversation to

topics with which Val was more, Sir Adolphus less, conversant; and the tables were turned, with great advantage to both parties.

Val, though but half understanding the service rendered by her tact, felt dimly grateful to her for something. His hostess had set herself the task of making the visit agreeable to him, and pleasant day after pleasant day flew by—he hardly knew how.

Again, she, and she only, suspected what an infliction for him would be the grand afternoon gathering of friends and neighbours to inaugurate his fountain—the ostensible object of his visit.

‘You will see all the county on our lawn to-day,’ she warned him laughingly, when the fatal morning came. ‘Don’t be too severe upon us and our rustic stupidity. You can afford to be magnanimous, I think.’

Val submitted to be on his good be-

haviour from three to six—to be introduced to every one, not to snub the somebodies, to talk to the people he was expected to talk to, and not to talk to Lady Brereton at all. He knew what she wished of him without being told. The hints, manœuvres, half-words, that coming to him from others were wasted or worse, he was learning to catch and interpret, when they emanated from her, with an adroitness worthy of a woman or a diplomate. Decidedly Diana's pupil was getting on.

He was rewarded. It is true the afternoon brought him some curious unflattering discoveries on the limits of fame, and the insignificance of even a distinguished artist out of his own people,—that is, the small minority to whom the pleasures of art have an appreciable value in life. Mr. Romer not being yet dead and a classic, his fame as a sculptor availed him nothing to forestall the respect of the squires and squiresses

of Hampshire. It was open to him to recommend himself, if he knew how, by good manners and pleasant conversation. So well did he get on that he ended by enjoying himself amazingly, and taking a liking to these good folks. Patiently he listened to well-meant but inconceivably ignorant criticisms, gave polite answers to depreciating questions on his craft, and satisfied the curiosity of more than one old lady on the processes of sculpture by treating her to a detailed account. Everybody was cordial, everybody was agreeable and intelligent. Was he fired with an ambition to become like one of these?—to turn landowner, and play the country gentleman sometimes, fancying he should succeed?

The *fête* was now drawing to a close, the guests dispersing. Sir Adolphus was escorting the last fat old lady to her carriage. Val, his ordeal over, remained with a look of pleasure and animation on his

countenance that amused Lady Brereton, who was watching him.

‘I am going to the Springs,’ she said; so they called the lakelet over which Val’s statues presided. ‘It seems to me I have been looking at your statues all the afternoon, and showing them off to my friends, and yet have not seen them myself.’

She stepped out on the lawn, Val accompanying her; and they strolled down the shrubberies, leading away to the park woods and the lakelet.

‘You have been very good to us this afternoon, Mr. Romer,’ she said to him, as they walked along.

‘I have been so happy,’ said Val, with a *naïveté* at which she laughed in a way that piqued him to add,

‘Is it so strange? Have you never been happy in your life?’

‘O yes; and I have been a child. But I might as well wish myself ten years old

again as for pleasure to come to me so easily.'

'You must be singularly unfortunate in your experience.'

'Or singularly exacting in my taste. People who will only be happy when, where, and how they choose cannot be happy often. Perhaps their enjoyment, when they get it, is the keener.'

'It is vulgarity, of course,' said he presently, 'to suppose that mere wealth and luxury can be enough to satisfy a human soul. Still—' He hesitated.

In his opinion a queen like herself, able to exalt, put down, patronise, delight, terrify, and tyrannise, ought not to find life dull. He was too diffident to speak out. She did so for him.

'I see you think my exactions unreasonable,' she said, 'and that I should be content as I am. Isn't it so?'

They had reached the Springs, an oblong

sheet of still water, fringed with laurels, with tall silver firs behind. A clump of beeches stood at the head, and dipped their twigs into the water. On the soft turf bank at the side, Val's fountain had been erected. They came and stood opposite, to look at it across the water.

‘Nay,’ said Val, ‘even power will not gratify you if you despise your subjects.’

‘Ah, you think I despise people.’

‘I know it.’

His audacity, far from displeasing her, provoked one of her rare flashes of earnest.

‘And are they not despicable—men and women? so feeble and petty and mean.’

‘Those who filled your grounds this afternoon?’ he asked, rallying.

‘Those who filled my grounds to-day. Well, yes. Why should they be exceptions?’

‘I felt myself very small among them, I know,’ he confessed. ‘Wondered how I

could ever have been such a fool as to think myself clever. They talk so nicely and well, and have questions and answers always ready. I feel my mental inferiority.'

'Mr. Romer, if your time had not been better spent than in studying general society, you would have observed, as I have, that it is the smaller minds mostly who find their level there. Original and independent persons rather despise it, or find it irksome. Nine-tenths of such intercourse must be commonplace. The charm of society is to make commonplaces attractive, and those people who don't disdain to devote their faculties to this are the invaluable members. That is why women, who are pettier and less original than men, will always rule society. And as to men, among those ready wits and good talkers you spoke of, there is perhaps not one capable of anything really great. You, Mr. Romer—well, I should like to think you were dif-

ferent. If I am wrong, I shall ask you not to undeceive me.'

It would be hard to resist such delicate flattery as this. It was sincere, that was the worst of it, though playfully spoken.

'You would like to think of me, then, as a blockhead in society,' he said whimsically.

'Nay, in society what you please; but, apart from it, capable of startling things such as one reads about, but which I have reason to think as incredible as the exploits of Sindbad the Sailor.'

'Instance.'

'Well,' she said meditatively. 'To me, Othello, Romeo, or their originals—all men, in fact, who ever staked their lives for a sentiment—an idea, are myths in every sense. They never existed; at any rate, they exist no longer.'

Val said, reflecting gravely,

'They were always exceptions. They may be rarer now than ever, very likely;

but they were scarce in any age, and they have representatives still.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'You must forgive me if I am incredulous.' She hesitated, and continued, with growing vivacity, 'You have heard people call me cold and heartless, cynical. Frankly, you have.'

Val looked down, embarrassed, and smiled.

'What if I have?'

'Or worse—say I am selfish, incapable of friendship and feeling. But lay it to their half-heartedness, not mine. True, I care too little for faint sympathy to accept it. Nothing short of whole friendship, entirely devoted, could ever compel from me a like return.' She spoke it slowly, with frank significance.

Val had a moment of vertigo. Probably he had been looking down too long into

the deep water. The sky seemed to be coming down, the marble figures of his Water Babies opposite to move and smile. He said—what could he say? something extremely foolish.

‘That idea—would be worth the stake, whatever it was.’

The portly figure of Sir Adolphus was seen approaching under the beeches at the head of the pond. Diana called to him to come and join them; the spot where she and Mr. Romer were standing afforded the best view of the fountain. The self-possession of some ladies is beyond all praise.

Val’s head was gone for the evening. Diana had never seen him so dull and inert at dinner. Sir Adolphus thought he had never been so pleasant. He did not contradict once, and listened to the platitudes of his host with a patience that was unprecedented. Val felt inclined to pinch himself to know if he were asleep or awake.

He was silent, as perhaps the safest mode of concealing his preoccupation. There were one or two other guests present, but he held aloof. In the course of the evening Diana saw him poring for some while over a newspaper, and she saw also that he was not reading it.

One among the items of news before him in print suddenly attracted his attention. He let fall an involuntary exclamation. Lady Brereton was hovering near. She just glanced over his shoulder, and instantly singled out the paragraph on which he had pitched.

‘Mdlle. Laurence Therval is at Bleiburg, for the Easter Musical Festival, previous to coming to England, where she will pass the remainder of the season.’

Val got no further. That name had power yet, it seemed, to judge from the expression of his countenance. He put down the newspaper hastily, but Diana read on.

There followed a list of the great personages and potentates expected to attend the festival. Instinctively she sought among them for the name of the petty sovereign at whose Court her cousin was just now *chargé d'affaires*.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW FOES.

It was the last day of the Bleiburg Musical Festival. The performances had extended over nearly a month. We English swallow our pleasures alive. The Germans cut up and consume theirs conscientiously and with deliberation. Cuscus was there with his band of chosen artistes, choicest among whom was a girl that had startled her old student-home, Bleiburg, out of its sober senses. For three weeks it had talked of nothing else.

Herr Emanuel's long and successfully-conducted tour in the Fatherland was drawing to a close. He and a select few of his party were leaving for England shortly.

Then for Laurence would begin a fresh campaign—six weeks of London concerts—after which she would be free.

Some said it was time already.

For a year now she had been on the wing—through Austria, Sweden, Germany in turn; taxed, and willingly taxing herself, to the utmost. She had been incessantly before the public, sustaining her reputation where it was established, creating it where she came as a stranger. Everywhere she had triumphed. At what cost to herself no one asked, no one could know. But whether it were prolonged over-exertion, nerve-tension, the strain of excitement, or the too fervent insistence of will over secret depression and exhaustion, that she was fighting now against a threatened collapse of physical strength it was no longer in her power to conceal. People said she was killing herself, and flocked to hear her with redoubled alacrity, as their manner is.

She would play, and play admirably, up to the last, but by dint of draining the very springs of nervous energy. You may draw on the principal, so to speak, of the vital powers when the interest runs short; but you risk bankruptcy in so doing. She would die, said the poetical; she would have to give up the violin, said the prosaical; but both agreed as to the impending cloud.

Cuscuta saw it first, and is haunted by desponding apprehensions. Sometimes it seems to him that she *must* break down before her engagement is up. Sincerely desirous for her welfare though he had become, his pecuniary interests were too intimately involved for his feelings to be purely disinterested. That contract had proved a capital speculation for him so far. But England was still unachieved; and in his calculations he had counted on the nation of shopkeepers for a splendid com-

mercial success. Only by next July would his last hundred pounds be safe in his pocket, and Mdlle. Therval, her compact fulfilled, at liberty to fall ill, or die, or go off, as Fate should determine.

Bleiburg, quiet conservative Bleiburg, had undergone vast changes in ten years. It was now an important station and centre, with a new theatre, and a new hotel, the Europa, with gardens going down to the river—a palace in lath and plaster, where all the grandees and other strangers come over for the festival were lodged, among them the august personage who represented majesty on the occasion, and who, since his arrival last night, with a train of officials, major and minor, had divided pretty equally with Mdlle. Therval the attention of the crowd.

Cuscus and his company had been faithful to the old-established, old-fashioned Golden Eagle; and here, at two o'clock

on that last festival afternoon, sat the director in the reading-room, and, whilst awaiting the assembling of his flock together, he sifted the newspapers for musical gossip. Here was a London journal a fortnight old, that gave the particulars of the recent signal failure, on the London stage, of Mdlle. Visconti, whose first appearance, heralded by a great flourish of trumpets, had proved her last in that country—resulting in so disastrous a fiasco as had impelled her to leave England at once. Cuscus had shown this paragraph to Laurence last night. He had a vast experience of women, and was convinced that, in the misfortunes of their female friends at least, there is always something not displeasing to them. This time, however, the pleasure was to Cuscus alone, who might re-congratulate himself that the star-singer in question—now a falling star, it appeared—had, by the special intervention of his old

friend Providence, parted from him in a huff before he had suffered any loss through her fast-waning popularity. Glancing over the *Strangers' Diary*, what should he spy but the lady's name among the list of yesterday's arrivals at the Europa! And—'Think of some people, and lo, they appear'—looking out into the street, he saw an open carriage drive by, with a convoy of showily-dressed ladies and moustached cavaliers, from the Europa—theatrical people, Cuscus perceived at a glance—among whom he descried a pink-bonneted head, with a golden chevelure, and a face he had seen before, but that provoked from him some ungallant remarks on the instability of female beauty.

Turning round, he confronted his violin-player, who had just come in, ready dressed for the concert. There was a sunbeam-like beauty there that would only fade with her life. Cuscus shook his head all the same.

These ethereal creatures, that neither age nor tarnish, may suddenly, like the sun-beam, give you the slip altogether.

Till now she had prevailed, and so steadily, that he had come to repose an almost superstitious confidence in her powers. To-day, as if to challenge and put to rebuke the last sceptics or detractors, she had selected to play some of the most trying pieces in a violinist's *répertoire*, — compositions certain to tax the finest faculties, and lay bare any weak point. The test would be no light one.

The theatre was crowded in every part. Mdlle. Visconti and friends were crammed into a little box somewhere near the roof. When Laurence came on, Linda witnessed her enthusiastic reception tolerably unmoved. Between herself and an artist of that calibre she was conscious now of such a disparity of purpose as hardly admitted of emulation or envy. One thing she

grudged her—her youthful beauty unimpaired.

It was, in fact, neither from private interest in her friend of yore, nor yet from professional interest in the performance, that Linda had been drawn to attend the concert at all. From the first moment of entering the theatre her opera-glasses were directed at a large centre box, with crimson-velvet hangings and projecting gilt crown overhead, with a perseverance that provoked at last the notice and the *persiflage* of her companions.

Had she never seen a Grand Duke before, they asked, that she could not take her eyes off his bald head? Linda laughed, but continued her scrutiny without intermission. It was not the potentate, however, but one of the foreigners belonging to the ducal party, whom she was observing—as keenly as the object of her observation

was watching the girl who had just appeared on the platform.

Of the music, Linda, from that moment, heard not a note. That other listener, on the contrary, was all attention: rapt—as indeed was every one but herself—it was natural he should be attentive. But there was a look on his face betokening a near interest—something more indeed, something she could not fathom, but that affected her very strangely. Her heart began to throb with wild wayward jealousy and resentment. Wild, indeed! He was only caught by the general passing *furor*.

Then, suddenly, it all flashed upon her. Gervase—Rome—Laurence. That winter and spring Laurence had passed there also. The coincidence, which hitherto had scarcely had sufficient interest for Linda to stay in memory, struck her all at once in a new world of conjecture opened itself imagination. She saw and judged

Laurence through the distorting medium of her own oblique mind.

She dropped her lorgnette now, and leaned on her hand moodily, full of mixed, bitter, cynical, yet heart-burning reflections. She had been a fool to care, ever—thrice a fool to have dreamt of winning him back.

The concert was but half over, when Linda rose abruptly. She was tired, she said, and should not wait for the second part of the programme, but go back to the hotel. Why stay to witness Laurence's second triumph, endure the unendurable, and perhaps betray herself to her quizzing friends? One of the gentlemen escorted her out of the building, put her into a carriage, and she drove back to the Europa, musing dismally.

On arriving, her first step was to summon her faithful handmaid. Virginie was ever-green still, and, to her credit be it spoken, she clung closer than ever to her mistress in

adversity. Linda sent her off to the theatre on a private errand, and awaited the result in her room on an upper story of the Europa, leaning on the window-sill, looking out on the gardens full of flowering shrubs going down to the Saale, and with rapidly-sinking spirits. Thought was not in her line, no more than it pertained to yonder swans lazily skimming the river's smooth surface. She was depressed by a feeling of everything taking leave of her in which she had trusted—youth, beauty, pleasure, triumph, excitement; and, these away, what were she and her life?

Virginie was gone but a quarter of an hour. She reëntered, and Linda looked up with an impatient,

‘Well?’

‘The *signore*,’ said Virginie mysteriously, ‘as soon as the concert was over, got separated from his party. Most of them drove off in different carriages to the promenade

to see the torchlight procession and illuminations. He walked straight to the Golden Eagle, and inquired if Mdlle. Therval had returned.'

Linda started up. Virginie proceeded, 'She had not. He said he wished to see her, as he was leaving early to-morrow, and would wait. He gave his card, and the porter showed him into the little front room on the ground-floor, which is Mdlle. Therval's *salotto*. O, it is a dream, that room! The tables, the sills, stuffed full of flowers she has received. The windows so crowded with bouquets and plants that I could scarcely see inside; but one smelt the roses out in the street!'

'That will do,' said Linda sharply. For a few minutes she remained, brooding sullenly; then roused herself, saying, 'Come, help me to change my dress. The others will be back to supper directly.'

When the last cheers had died away in

the theatre, Laurence, behind the scenes, stood there, receiving compliments extraordinary on her success. There was but one word for it, they said; and, at all events, it was certain they could find but one—*colossal*. So spake German artist after German artist, German amateur after German amateur, as they came up to her with this majestic adjective on their lips. It was the worst moment of her life.

For she felt like one who has strained every nerve to climb to the top of a pinnacle, reached it, but only to be seized with vertigo, and fall headlong. She had surprised herself as well as her audience, but she had touched the tidemark of her highest force. The reaction was coming now in proportion to the unnatural strain. She felt as though she could not have played another note, had her life depended on it. Her head was confused; her hands, her frame trembled. 'I have done what I could,' she thought

despairingly, as she seemed to see the end of her fighting power at last.

Cuscus and the rest were going to drive about to see the festivities, but she parted from them at the hotel. She felt tired and faint. On the threshold the porter met her with a card: 'A stranger waiting to see Mdle. Therval.' Laurence took the card mechanically, with a weary sigh.

Then her face lit up in the dusk; her heart bounded so that she lost breath. She did not stop to think or wonder how the thing had come to pass, but went straight in, as though it were to meet Felicia or Cherubina. It was always but half light in that little room. The windows in the narrow street were overshadowed by the high houses opposite; moreover, as Virginie had reported, there was a flowery screen before the panes, a wall of delicate ferns and purple clematis, and roses whose fragrance spread far and wide. Laurence

opened the door and entered quite softly, standing before Gervase ere he was aware of her presence, so that it was she who surprised him at last.

‘Forgive me, forgive me, for letting you leave me!’ The agitated words rushed impulsively from his lips. ‘I might know—you might know—I should never love anything on this earth so much. Trust me with your hand and your love!’

Laurence, without replying, let him clasp her hand, with a strange sense of rescue and reanimation. She strove to be firm and collected, but in vain. She put her hand to her forehead; a dizziness came over her for a moment; the next, and she sat there on the sofa—Gervase beside her—their hands were locked; nor men nor gods should part them this time, was what he swore to himself. Laurence felt her spirits revive.

‘It was that, then,’ she said, looking up

bewildered. 'You were there to-day. How did I know it? for I did know it to-day as I played.'

Gervase, taking her face in his hands, kissed her passionately again and again, saying,

'Yes, it was I. I wanted to speak to you across them all—my heart to yours, Renza. As you played, I felt an appeal there, in your music, to which I only had the response.'

The girl drooped her head, with a half-scared smile of too much delight.

'Child,' he said fondly and wistfully, 'how pale you are! What have you been doing with yourself? You always looked more like heaven than earth, but you look now as though earth had no part in you.'

Her beauty indeed was fast taking a perilously delicate character. Her complexion seemed to him too transparent, her features etherealised, her hands too

thin and white, and a terrible fear came upon him that, now he had sought her out, resolved to make her his own for ever, it was too late; and if he held her, it was only to see her escape into a star or a cloud, and so vanish out of his sight.

Her smile reassured him. Joy is your best miracle-worker.

‘I have been so unhappy,’ she said, ‘so much alone. It was killing me—stifling me; but I shall be well now. O, I am stronger than you think.’

‘But every one’s strength has an end,’ he said, smiling—‘even yours. Music is too hard a master for you sometimes, Laurence.’

‘It is not that; but I have been living in the dark. To forget and be forgotten—that is hard sometimes.’

He was going to speak. She stopped him with a sign. He understood. Enough for that moment to know he was there, to

feel it was his will to unite his lot with hers.

‘Renza,’ he whispered at last.

She raised her face, and saw his eyes glistening with a strange exultation; it was with the very enthusiasm of passion that he spoke.

‘I will let go everything for you and our love. Say I may love and live for you only.’

It was dark and still in that little room. Outside a noisy torchlight procession was filing down the street; the fitful glare of the burning brands flashed on the walls, and the students’ songs rang in the air as the merry-makers marched past under the window.

The sounds died away in the distance. Then she answered low,

‘I love you, I trust you, I could die for you. It is for my life.’

‘And mine.’

Presently footsteps and voices were heard in the courtyard. Laurence started up. It was her own party returning. They two must part hurriedly. There would be no more meeting till England; but, after that, no parting any more.

Gervase walked back to his hotel in a state of supreme elation. He loved Renza madly. That dreary year of absence had sufficed to bring home to him the conviction that the opportunity of his life lay here—in bold recognition of the exceptional happiness opened up to him, in this instance, by an exceptional step. How everything had played into his hands at last, to help him to reconcile that step with his old self—his fastidiously educated tastes and habits.

He had a thousand times more to lose in his own world than most men, and to make him reluctant to alter his position there for the worse. The luxuries of ease

and culture were, in his idea, as indispensable to a man's life as food and firing, and his nurture and experience had indisposed, if not unfitted him for struggles and obscurity. That sort of relative poverty, which had hampered him hitherto—a clog to ambition in his expensive profession, a tacit injunction to marry for money—was removed, at an unexpected and opportune moment. He was free to withdraw from a career which had long failed to satisfy him. He was enabled to mould his future according to his own fancy.

Was that not better any day, he thought gaily, than a consulate in some god-forgotten place—South America or the Balkans—perhaps to die there of fever or be murdered by insurrectionists?

When he reached the Europa, he stepped out into the gardens, just to compose himself a little in the shade and the cool, before joining his friends inside. Their

excellencies were not fresh from a love-scene.

He found the garden deserted, but for a gay party of some half-dozen idlers, enjoying an evening stroll. Their loud voices and laughter resounded through the shrubberies, and Gervase instinctively kept out of the way, turning off into the little by-walks whenever he caught a glimpse of the pink dresses and fierce mustachios approaching, unconscious that the pertinacity with which he avoided them was provoking their notice and banter.

‘There goes a solitudinarian,’ said one. ‘What is he thinking of that he fights so shy of his kind? How to break off a love-affair, eh?’

‘As if so much thought was required for that!’ laughed one of the ladies fair. ‘I say he is writing a five-act play.’

‘It’s a German professor, composing a work on philosophy.’

‘Or a conspirator. Two to one he’s a conspirator.’

‘Done!’ said the first speaker. ‘What do you wager that I accost him, and have the question decided?’ And he turned up a side-path, so as to intercept the *flâneur* in his walk. The others followed. Linda, seized with an inkling of the stranger’s identity, would have stopped her madcap friend, but it was too late. The young quiz stood before Gervase, and, lifting his hat politely,

‘Monsieur,’ he said.

Gervase looked up interrogatively, taking his cigarette from his lips.

‘A florin for your thoughts. You will excuse the liberty; but for some time we have been lost in admiration at the constancy with which you pursue your meditations,—and speculating what can possibly be the subject—of such absorbing interest. . . . No offence, I assure you,’ growing feebler

and feebler in his banter, wavering in his effrontery, stammering, then coming to a dead halt at last, horrified, as, through the dusk, he thought to recognise one whom he had seen this morning in friendly conversation with the august personage. Supposing he had gone and insulted an ambassador!

Much to his relief, there came a good-humoured reply, in his own tone of mock gravity,

‘I am sorry to disappoint Monsieur; but when I smoke, the reflections I make are strictly between me and my cigarette.’

Gervase had now seen Linda, and they exchanged distant salutations. Her companions—masculine and feminine—seemed taken with an immense fancy for this extemporised acquaintance. They stuck to him, rather to his annoyance, and were not all at once to be shaken off. They insisted on his walking down with them to the

river's edge to see the water-fowl. Here Linda stood apart, absently throwing stones into the water. Her friends were teasing the swans, enticing them on land, to enjoy the spectacle of their awkward evolutions. The noisy merriment evoked by the sport made a safe cover for Linda's voice, as she said to Gervase, who was nearest her,

‘What is the matter with you this evening? You look very much disturbed.’

It was herself who so looked; he was serenity by comparison.

‘You must recollect,’ he said, ‘this meeting took me entirely by surprise.’

‘You took it quietly enough,’ she replied tauntingly.

‘I have not your liking for scenes,’ he said, slightly irritated.

Linda was now throwing stones rather viciously.

‘Nor did you seem pleased,’ she said; and as Gervase did not instantly disclaim,

she burst out, in a low agitated tone, 'There, I knew it—I knew it! I told you so in Rome; you denied it. You hate me—you wish I was dead. If I thought that, I could kill those I had to thank for it, you know.'

Gervase made a slight gesture of impatience. Linda felt ashamed, despairing. She knew she was alienating him at every word by her childish violence, yet clung to her hope—an insane hope that this doomed love might rise from the dead.

'You detest me. Why don't you say so?' she repeated. 'It is all over, and you would give the world for it never to have been.'

'Linda, be reasonable,' he urged, distracted.

'Reasonable! I?' and she laughed. 'Now was it ever my forte?' looking at him with something of the old petulant charm.

‘No; that it certainly was not,’ he returned promptly, but good-naturedly. ‘I wish only you would not talk and conduct yourself in this wild way.’

‘How can I help it?’ she complained; ‘now I know you care for me no longer; now you look at me as if I was somebody else; turn away impatiently when I talk, as if you wished you could send me out of the world. You promised always to be the same to me—at least, until you married,’ she ended imploringly.

His silence made her look up; his resolutely placid expression made her exclaim,

‘You are going to marry.’

‘And if I were?’ he said.

Linda flared up. Some fierce feeling choked her utterance. Another moment, and a torrent of injurious reproaches would have burst; but one of her friends ran up, familiarly placing his hand on Gervase’s shoulder, and imploring leave to draw his

attention to the antics of the swan—so very comical.

Two minutes afterwards, when Gervase was able to observe Linda again, she seemed to have recovered herself. But the expression her face had taken was so strange, so forbidding, that it prompted him before quitting her to let fall a few grave, deprecating words.

No answer, not another syllable would she give. Earnest, banter, reproach, advice, he tried alike in vain. She continued to stare into the water, throwing stones. By and by her comrades raised a shout—

‘Mind, Regina, you’ve hit the swan!’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘I want to hurt something or somebody.’

The words were meant for Gervase; but he was already out of hearing.

‘It’s cold,’ she said to the others. ‘I shall go in now.’

She went to her room. Virginie was

concerned for her mistress, who, she saw, was in a white rage; for, tearless and speechless, Linda sent her humble *confidante* out of the room—a rare and alarming precaution. Virginie had seen her in these fits of anger scores of times. Nothing in the least tragic had ever come of them; and yet they frightened the elderly *soubrette*, who crossed herself as she shut the door, shaking her head and muttering, as usual,

‘She will do herself or somebody else a mischief one of these days.’

When Linda had recovered from the stupefaction of mixed amazement, disappointment, jealousy, and bitter ill-will, her passion found vent in tears of rage.

‘Her!’ she cried. ‘If it had been one of his own people, I could have borne it. But what is she higher than myself or better than myself? Ah, it must be that she is the better hypocrite.’

Reason, compunction, everything was

swept away in the blinding storm of passion. She spared herself nothing. Her fancy conjured up a vision of Laurence in England: *fêted*, adored, respected, perhaps pronounced by the most aristocratic society in the world as not unworthy of Gervase Damian's hand. It is just there that such things happen. The world might look on and approve.

But not his own relations! Little as Linda knew of these, something whispered there would be fierce opposition in that quarter.

'His mother,' she thought,—'can she know? She would stop it if she could.'

An idea, that! In the ferment of venomous emotions, a slave to animosity, she was ready to follow its dictates unshrinkingly. She went and rummaged among her papers for an address she recollected to have once discovered and noted down, more from curiosity than any design.

‘Mrs. Damian, Pomeroy Lodge, —, Hampshire.’

Without pausing an instant to consider, she sat down and penned the longest letter she ever wrote in her life.

The next morning she spent some time over another, the despatch of which she intrusted to Virginie, who beheld with pleasure that it was addressed to an old friend, Count Janowski, at Monte Carlo.

‘Has the *signora* made up her mind to him at last?’ thought Virginie, brightening. ‘I always told her she could not do better,’ she concluded ambiguously.

CHAPTER V.

A CRISIS.

IT was an article of faith with Val Romer that, of all human follies of a sentimental sort, the most inexcusably foolish is to fall in love with a married woman. He regarded it as an emotional aberration, deserving the ridicule only of men of sense.

Six weeks since his visit to Hawkwood. The Breretons were in town again for the season; himself also. Clever man, bold, original, independent agent that he seemed, never was the most wax-hearted lover more banefully under the dominion of a wilful, self-centred, beautiful woman. Doomed to be a brilliant proof of his own theory, driven to turn aside from his course, to pursue the will-of-the-wisp of an impossible joy, over

hill and dale, bog and brier, to end ingloriously in disenchantment, when too late, to find he had lost the road and the race.

The dragon-fly sends the chafers and midges she has bewitched to fetch her a spark from the candle. She will love them if they succeed. Eagerly they do her bidding, and, for their pains, find themselves wingless, lamed, doomed henceforth to crawl the damp earth like worms—they who once hovered in ether and sunlight.

He still had glimpses, now and then, of what was happening to him. How had he fallen from his old proud loyalty to an artistic ideal! Already the days seemed distant when he worked for the pleasure of the thing. He was rapidly coming to treat his imagination and skill as means to certain commercial ends. But these misgivings were getting rarer, and he daily more inclined to scout them as sentimental nonsense. Practically speaking, he was tho-

roughly prosperous. The demand for fresh Carmens and Vashtis was increasing on both sides of the Atlantic; it was thus easy for him to secure a good income for an indefinite time without fresh trouble, simply by turning out copies of old favourites to order. And, formerly, none more severe and contemptuous than he on artists in any department, who, finding they can make their fortune off a single happy effort, prefer multiplying repetitions of it *ad infinitum* to the stern work and the risk of fresh creations.

But if originality and industry were fast rusting out in him, on the other hand he might flatter himself he was the favourite of many and the chosen friend of one, the being who had so successfully usurped the helm of his life.

Against her numberless feminine arts of enslavement Val was defenceless as a child. Often in society she would provoke him

past endurance, by appearing to slight and half-ignore him; then, when she had worked him up into a fury of estrangement and hostility, confound him by some delighting proof of her regard stronger than any yet vouchsafed, as if to imply that this expressed the earnest of her relation to him, and her coldness was mere play, to hood-wink the vulgar curiosity of outsiders.

Val, distracted, asked himself why she tormented him thus. What was the pleasure of experimenting on a thralldom of which she must be well assured? Ask why flies like crawling up and down the window-pane—why squirrels enjoy turning a wheel; but ask not why lovely woman stoops to mischief.

Val was crossing the Park one afternoon at the close of an idle day. Last night he had had a reception at his house, with the Breretons among his guests,—an honour, for they were as chary of accepting

hospitality as they were liberal in extending it—a huge inconsistency, he thought. The affair had gone off brilliantly, but to sit down to work this morning was, he found, impossible, and the only remedy he felt inclined to seek for the *désœuvrement* caused by the stir and distraction was a homœopathic one. It was Lady Brereton's 'at home' afternoon, and she would be ill pleased if he failed to put in an appearance.

He was not alone; he never was alone now. He knew all London, or all London knew him, which amounted to the same. Charley Sparkleton, the particular 'friend' who had picked him up and left the Hyde Park railings to walk a little way with him, was good company, at all events, a pleasant, unprincipled young rascal, whom Val—everybody, indeed—rather liked. He was not exactly of proud origin; but if he had made his way into society, in the first instance, by dint of unblushing assurance, he had

established his permanent position there by genuine social talent. He had made himself useful, indispensable. For fifteen years he had led an amusing sort of life, mostly at other people's expense, and thriven upon it, never seeming to grow a day older, or to tire of his daily bread, gaiety and gossip. Of news, social, literary, and artistic, he was an impassioned collector, with a very genius for picking out the precious pebbles on the beach, sorting, grinding, polishing, setting, then exhibiting, and did in this way a good deal of amateur journalism. His correspondence was at a premium. It was always racy, rarely ill-natured, and never, or hardly ever, totally untrue. He was constantly at Val's studio, and acted as a kind of middle-man between Romer and the world, contributing not a little to the spread of the artist's celebrity. Val was now sufficiently the fashion for the shape of his door-knocker to be a matter of public interest.

Sparkleton had fastened on him to-day for a purpose. He wanted to get something out of him about Mdlle. Therval, who was expected in London almost immediately, whose appearance was to be the musical event of the season, and respecting whom any information, the earlier the better, had a distinct interest, to say nothing of a high market value.

He was disappointed at eliciting no piquant particulars, no anecdotes. Romer would only talk learnedly about her violin-playing. But where was the credit of knowing what everybody knew? If he could have said what her favourite colour was now, or if she kept a little dog, or what she had for lunch! Sparkleton thought it too bad that, out of two personal acquaintances of hers, he should be able to extract no more than that she was an excellent musician. There was his friend Lady Brereton, who admitted having known her in Rome,

but maintained a like rigid reserve. Their manner provoked his curiosity, and set his lively fancy playing in all directions. He maliciously hinted as much to Val to-day, hoping to draw him out. In vain. Satisfied that he should get nothing out of Romer—he was more obstinately impenetrable than ever—Sparkleton dropped the subject, and presently, his companion.

‘How about yourself?’ he asked carelessly, as they parted. ‘When do you desert us for Rome? Do you know, I’ve a mind to look you up at the old place this autumn.’

Val laughed.

‘Do you know, I got an uncommonly good offer this morning from a fellow over there, who wants to take my villa off my hands.’

‘Shall you accept, do you think?’ asked the man of news eagerly.

Already the idea had crystallised into a

pretty little paragraph for the art column of his favourite feuilleton the *Firefly*:

‘Good news to all true lovers of art. It is with the greatest pleasure that we are able to announce that Mr. Valentine Romer will shortly part with his Roman villa, to reside permanently among his countrymen,’ &c.

There was something else behind, though, with which Val did *not* acquaint Mr. Sparkleton, something which Mr. Sparkleton would have cared infinitely more to know, and which would have furnished him with a second pleasing announcement for his journal:

‘Sir Adolphus and Lady Brereton start for Scotland early in July in their yacht Seadrake. Mr. Romer, the well-known sculptor, goes with them,’ &c.

It was almost as if Diana were in league with the applicant for the Villa Marta, whose offer had arrived by the same

post as a flattering invitation to the above effect.

Sparkleton went off, and Val sat him down on a bench to ponder his decision. But his fate, though he knew it not, had passed out of his hands. He was now on his way to Lady Brereton's house at Connaught Gate. She would be sure to broach the subject of the yachting party. When had the stubborn firmness of his nature prevailed against her persuasion? Besides, he wanted to accept. How many would give worlds for such an invitation! *On n'est jeune qu'une fois*. He must let the Villa Marta go, and with it—

Just then a boy's hand slapped his shoulder unceremoniously. Val wheeled round angrily to send the urchin to the devil. The youngster had run off, and was capering down the path, shouting jubilantly,

'There, mamma, I said so. Look for yourself.'

The voice was the voice of Master Domenico, and in his two guardians approaching, Val recognised Madame Araciél and Cherubina.

He rose hastily and embarrassed ; for, though well aware that the family had been two months in England, he had made no effort to seek them out. Madame, in the effusion of her own joy, scarcely noticed how stiff and formal his greeting was. She reminded him they had not met since Laurence's unexpected departure from Rome; reproached him amiably for never having come to see herself and family in *villeggiatura* at Frascati, and expatiated on the pleasure of this meeting. If Val's manner was deficient in cordiality, she had enough for both.

She pressed him to dine with them that night. He regretted he was engaged. Tomorrow, then? Alas, he had no evening free for weeks to come. Their lodgings

were hard by, in Park-street. Val consented to walk with them so far. He was guarded and monosyllabic; Madame all communicativeness; Cherubina silent, but observant.

‘Papa has gone to Brighton for a concert,’ Madame announced. ‘He returns to-morrow, plays once or twice more in London, then starts for Scotland, so that the field here will be clear for—. Why, Mr. Romer,’ reproachfully, ‘you have never asked after our child.’

Val, the hypocrite, looked up with an inquiring air.

‘Laurence!’ ejaculated Madame, puzzled by his stupidity.

‘Mdlle. Therval is quite well, I hope?’ he said frigidly.

‘So I trust. But she has been away from us now a year. In a fortnight she comes to us in London. That will be a happiness for every one.’

They reached the door.

‘Mr. Romer, I have a little favour to beg. I want to write my husband a line to tell him his train. He always mistakes unless I do. It would be kind of you to post my letter.’

Val acquiesced, and went indoors with them. Madame ran up-stairs to write. Domenico was sent to borrow an envelope and a stamp from the landlady. Val found himself alone in the little ground-floor parlour with Cherubina.

A year had done wonders in transforming the child into a young lady. Her face was childlike still; but her undergrown figure had shot up suddenly, and recent promotion to long trailing skirts completed the metamorphosis, which impressed Val profoundly.

She, for her part, was dismayed by the change in his manner, the unfamiliar constraint and hardness. She dared not speak

for fear of a rebuff, but fixed two large eyes on him, full of wonder, and implied reproach.

‘Really, Miss Cherubina,’ he began abruptly by and by, becoming impatient of this silent scrutiny, ‘a year has made quite another person of you. I told you it would. I’ll engage that no one now would know you for the original of that statue of mine.’

‘A year does change people sometimes,’ remarked Cherubina curtly. ‘If Renza were anybody else, I think I should be afraid to meet her again, after so long, lest she should not be the same to us. But *she* has never altered, and never will.’

Val had turned off to the window, humming an air.

‘Do you not want to see her again?’ she asked curiously, half-frightened at her own boldness.

Val replied, with rather awkward irony, ‘Indeed you must excuse me. I have

not been thinking of it in particular. It is too much honour for me to suppose I can be specially concerned in Mdlle. Therval's movements.'

Cherubina was mute, but only for a moment, with mixed indignation and surprise. Val was angry with Renza. O, Cherubina had known that a year ago, when he never kept his promise of coming to see them at Frascati, and the child had found her own way of accounting for it: Val loved Renza, and she had alienated him by running off so abruptly, without a word.

'You used to care,' she ventured timidly, 'if things went well or ill with her.'

'If I am not mistaken,' he said dryly, 'no one need have the slightest anxiety on that score. I hear only of her brilliant successes, flatteries, presents, the high terms she can demand, the fabulous sums she has made on her last tour.'

His tone displeased Cherubina seriously; she was up in arms at once.

‘She has made eighty thousand francs,’ she said, ‘and has given it all to pay papa’s debts.’

‘Debts—eh, what?’ Val rubbed his forehead, and stood beholding her with a blank look.

‘Don’t tell her I told you,’ continued Cherubina hurriedly. ‘Tell nobody. Papa had got himself into trouble at Milan—dreadful trouble—with gambling. We never knew how bad it had been till long after. Renza thought it would distress us less if we heard of it when it was all past and gone, and papa was well again. He sent for her to Milan, to tell her about it. She had just been offered this engagement, and took it, got the money advanced; and she saved him, he says. For he was not himself, he was ill for long afterwards, and he declares he might have done something mad

or wicked, but for her. She is generous; it was not only the money: she risked her health. The doctors had warned her not to undertake what she did; but papa's danger would not wait, and she bound herself to work and earn all that was wanted.'

Cherubina stopped for breath. But she saw Val was listening with keen interest, and resumed confidently,

'Next July her engagement ends; but I am afraid for her: she has had no rest—and—'

Madame came rushing into the room, and cut short Cherubina's speech.

'Here, Mr. Romer, here is the letter,' she said, presenting it.

'Just in time for post,' said Val, snatching his hat and escaping, scarcely vouchsafing an answering look or nod to Cherubina, who, though alarmed at her own indiscretion, could not bring herself to repent it.

Connaught Gate was not half a mile off, yet Val took half an hour to walk that distance. His mind meanwhile was proceeding apace. It was like turning a sharp corner in the road, disclosing a new bit of country.

‘Blockhead!’ he uttered presently aloud, surprised by a tardy perception of how readily he had been the disciple—perhaps the dupe—of Diana’s idle but noxious cynicism. How unresistingly he had allowed her to thrust Laurence from the pedestal she had occupied in his imagination! His blind trust in his present fair monitor had received a shake. The idea that his mind had been poisoned, his judgment vitiated, enslaved, had for the first time been forced upon him; and at the same moment he woke to a distant uncomfortable sense of the little dignified part he had been playing lately.

Then he bethought him these reflec-

tions were unfair to Diana. Before he let mistrust go further, he would put her to the test.

Lady Brereton was not alone. His reception was of the cool order, for which, in the presence of strangers, Val was prepared, and accustomed to put on it a desired interpretation of his own. To-day first he questioned whether this distance and indifference were not a sincerer expression of her feeling towards him than the exquisite cordiality she tendered him in private.

He kept apart. Diana had instantly detected the change in his manner, the shade of cold severity and reserve, and, when all her other guests were gone, taxed him with it in a playful way.

‘Are you aware you are looking as grave and absent as a professor of mathematics?’ she said lightly. ‘Is it a new statue you are meditating? Surely you are

not troubling yourself any more about the memorial to poor dear old Lady Ravenstock?’

Val hesitated; and Diana went on, laughing,

‘If her tiresome husband isn’t satisfied, you must remind him she only died last year, and cannot be expected to have altered so much for the better in so short a time.’

‘I suppose I have lived the life of a savage and a recluse too long,’ he remarked, ‘and cannot shake off my old bad habits. I shall always be giving offence in society. I am no courtier.’

‘Do you tell me that for news?’ she said, smiling. ‘I thought we had known each other long enough and well enough to have no startling discoveries left to make.’

‘Certainly you know me well enough,’ he said bluntly, ‘but whether I—’ and he paused significantly.

She turned her eyes to his with astonishment. In he plunged, headlong,

‘Lady Brereton!’

The wonder in her eyes was infinite. What was coming next?

‘It is a year ago, in the garden of my villa at Rome. We were speaking of Mdle. Therval.’

‘Well?’ she uttered haughtily, with some impatience; but Val was not disconcerted,

‘A girl who, as you knew, had always answered to my dreams of the ideal human being. But for her, I should perhaps now be a muddle-headed attorney, instead of a—a—pretty fair sculptor. In her I saw genius go together with beauty and goodness—just what an artist needs to show him his faith is no chimera.’

‘Anything more?’ she murmured. The man must be out of his senses to speak to her thus.

‘You broke my faith in her, you destroyed my trust. To this moment, I don’t know how. A word, a suggestion from you was enough. I believed you, without question, or hesitation, or proof.’

‘Scarcely,’ she interposed. ‘I think you are forgetting that time, and misrepresent what occurred.’

‘I forget nothing,’ said Val, ‘nor how, viewing all by the false light of suspicion, I just turned away, silently acknowledging that what I had been worshipping all my life was probably but the creation of a boy’s, a fool’s fancy. Yet boys and fools turn out to be right sometimes, and wise men make mistakes.’

Diana bent down her head, to hide a slight perplexity. She had told him no downright lies in the past that she recollected; still she felt herself on precarious ground.

‘One question,’ he resumed, after a

pause. 'When Mr. Gervase Damian left Rome, did you know his reasons? Did you know more?'

Diana shrugged her shoulders. She was too proud to equivocate, and felt it might not be safe. 'Certainly I did not know then,' she said indifferently.

'But you have heard since,' he urged. 'You and he are cousins, not strangers.'

'Yes, I have heard since,' she said, with cold displeasure, 'that he went to the Riviera.'

'Mdlle. Therval never met him again after that evening at my house?'

'Perhaps,' she said haughtily, misled by Val's manner—it was hasty, eager, and in the heat of the moment she failed to discern that it was not Laurence only, but herself, her good faith and sincerity, that were in question at the present moment. 'But, really, Mr. Romer, you must allow me to ask you the reason of this cross-

examination. I presume you have one. Otherwise I am at a loss to comprehend it.'

'Certainly I have one,' he retorted, slightly provoked. 'You, as well as myself, have shown in society a reserve on the subject of Mdlle. Therval—a marked coolness, to say the least, which I can tell you has proved enough to set certain people speculating and romancing. What I have to say is this—that, to stop people's mouths before fables go flying about, it would be well, and it would be a graceful action on your part, that when Mdlle. Therval arrives you should ask her to your house to play.'

'Mr. Romer!'

Her accent let him know he had given mortal offence. Val was dismayed. What had he said that was so dreadful?

'But what objection could there be?' he stammered.

'O, pardon me. I was not even thinking of that,' pointedly.

‘I see. You think it unwarrantable of me to presume to say what you should or should not do. But it seems to me this is not a matter for formality and conventional reserve. I thought it was permitted to lay them aside on occasion, since, as you said yourself, we were old friends,’ he concluded appealingly.

But Diana’s face had taken an expression of obstinacy and ostentatious forbearance not unlike Sir Adolphus’s when Val talked politics, and at least equally provoking.

‘Will you ask Mdlle. Therval to your house?’ he repeated, after waiting in vain for some response.

‘Why do you lay such stress upon that?’

‘Because it is your best—your sole way of proving to me that you admit the injustice of your former depreciating insinuations.’

‘I neither admit nor deny. I suspend judgment.’

‘You refuse what I ask, then?’ he said brusquely. ‘It is not much.’

Diana was piqued by this insistence and replied distantly,

‘Really, Mr. Romer, if you are so anxious to meet her, you can surely find other opportunities. I cannot ask you to depend upon this one.’

Val was incensed to the depths of his honest nature. His serious earnest mocked by persistent levity and scepticism! And he had thought that woman had a heart, and he some power over it!

The power she unquestionably held over his own was in jeopardy now. She saw that, and it embittered her against Laurence, who stood between her and this man’s homage, that she had stooped to manœuvre to win.

She kept silence, looked patience, as much as to say, ‘You have lost your head and your temper; but I am indulgent, and will give you time to recover.’

When she thought she had given him time enough, she spoke deprecatingly,

‘You see, the lives of these people and their ideas and customs are so different from one’s own.’

‘Thank you for reminding me,’ put in the sculptor irascibly.

‘Their notions of feminine principle and propriety so much laxer,’ she continued unregardingly. ‘Among themselves they countenance much we regard as inadmissible. Some persons, I know, make contrary laws for different classes. For my part, I do not see, if that is allowed, where we are to stop. I decline to adopt a different code of honour and morals by which to judge women of different castes. A woman who consents to receive and return addresses never meant in earnest forfeits respect.’

Val’s pent-up feeling burst forth now unrestrainedly,

‘What shall we say of women who accept in play what is offered in earnest—who win love and friendship under false pretences—who play with men’s lives, devotion, and happiness, not from weakness or passion—there is pardon for that—but from cold self-love? Playing with fire, who know themselves unflammable! A poor pastime, Lady Brereton.’

Diana was stupefied.

‘Mr. Romer,’ she murmured, ‘you forget yourself.’

‘You are right,’ Val returned incisively. ‘I do sometimes; and you, never. That is what I meant, I think. The chances are uneven. You must allow me to be glad of our conversation, since it was time I should begin to understand better my own position and yours.’

He was going. This was no parting, but a lasting rupture. Diana made a movement towards him, trying once more the

power of a beseeching look. Val repelled the subtle advance with an imperceptible gesture. Theirs had been no common friendship. She recognised that now, failing to be all to him, she would henceforward be nothing.

When the door closed upon him, Diana, for all her ingrained habit of self-command, found herself more thoroughly and painfully agitated than ever she had been in her life. She had a bare moment to recover. Val was scarcely out of the house, when the servant announced,

‘Mrs. Damian.’

Before Diana, distracted, could frame an excuse for not receiving this inopportune visitor, the lady was in the room. She was in a state of excitement at least equal to Diana’s, and much less controlled.

‘Di, are you alone? Say you can see no one. I must speak to you.’

‘What is the matter?’ asked Diana,

aghast. Never had she seen Gervase's mother so upset. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. She looked ready to go off into a fit.

Mrs. Damian spoke quickly,

'Something very serious—something that would be a calamity for us all. Di, it must be stopped, cost what it may.'

'Gervase?'

She nodded, and resumed, in a voice choked with agitation,

'My poor mad boy! He was always so dangerously impulsive.' Then suddenly changing her tone: 'Di, it is all your doing! Why didn't you marry him?'

'He never asked me,' retorted Diana, coming out with the truth at last for sheer impatience.

'Well, you will have your revenge,' said his mother. 'He is going to ruin himself—to ruin us all—by marrying—'

'Laurence Therval.'

‘Di!’ Mrs. Damian stared, as if at something unearthly. ‘He has told you, then?’ she asked, with instant jealousy of her son’s confidence.

‘Not he. But I often saw them together in Rome. I suspected something—a wild affair; but she went off suddenly, and I thought Gervase had got tired of it, and given it up, when he came to you at Genoa.’

‘*That* was why we could do nothing with him there,’ cried the mother pathetically, throwing up her hands; ‘and I could hardly get him to look at the little widow, whom I had coaxed into coming on purpose. A clear ten thousand a year, Di, lost to the family, all for a caprice.’

‘A caprice that lasts a year, and results in an offer of marriage, deserves another name,’ remarked Diana unmercifully.

‘A craze, an infatuation,’ struck in Mrs. Damian distressedly. ‘And this recovery of poor Otho’s property, which is a little

fortune for us, and that we have all been rejoicing over as a godsend, has merely smoothed the way for his folly. He writes to me that he has made up his mind to retire from the service. Di, we shall hear next of his consorting with actors and gipsies, and married—married to a notorious adventuress.'

'An adventuress?' repeated Diana, surprised in spite of herself.

Mrs. Damian rambled on disconsolately, 'He is coming to England next month for Amy's marriage. Mdlle. Therval is expected every day. I hear she is going to be well received in society. I myself have been urging people to take her up! It will confirm him in his madness. I know women and mothers who will tell him he is quite right. (It is not *their* son.) Then he will confess all to me, he will have to choose between her and me; and he will choose—her !'

She hid her face, and sobbed hysterically.

‘Do I understand that he has told you nothing yet?’ asked Diana soothingly, half perplexed by this incoherence of woe. She felt sorry for the woman—sympathetic; and it stimulated her animosity against Laurence. ‘Pray who is your informant?’

Mrs. Damian looked up. The paroxysm had passed. She replied,

‘Some friend of Gervase’s—a foreigner. Do you know anything of a Countess Janowski?’

Diana reflected.

‘I have heard of a Count Janowski. I did not know he was married.’

Mrs. Damian took out a letter.

‘She writes in Gervase’s interest,’ she said, ‘to warn me.’

Diana read attentively. Her countenance betokened intense surprise, amount-

ing to discomfiture. But her clear sight led her instantaneously to put her finger on the truth. She looked up.

‘That’s the wild revenge of some jealous woman,’ was the spontaneous comment that rose to her lips. But she checked it, and perused the letter once again.

Why should this disclosure startle her so? Did it not merely substantiate her own theories? She remained thoughtfully scrutinising the date of the letter, the hand, the signature—‘Marie Filomena, Comtesse Janowski.’

‘Well?’ asked the mother anxiously.

‘The girl has duped us all,’ said Diana, rising, pacing the room, and speaking half to herself, imperiously, as if to force conviction on her own mind. ‘It all comes out now. At last I understand.’

‘You heard something of this elopement, then; you confirm the story?’ asked Mrs. Damian breathlessly.

‘Baron Miramar—I can supply the name at all events—left Rome last April for his palazzo at the lakes, it was supposed. He is one of those erratic people, into the reason of whose movements no one takes the trouble to inquire. It has transpired since that he has been singing at public concerts under an assumed name; it got into the papers. He passed for being music-mad, so nobody wondered any further about the freak. Mdlle. Therval is cleverer than I thought—Gervase served her as a blind—’

She stopped, broke into a laugh, with a ring of triumph in it, and concluded, ironically, to herself: ‘I wonder what pretty fiction she has invented, now that she has been deserted by her knight-errant, and contrived opportunely to transfer her affections, to hoodwink poor Gervase.’

She talked of Gervase and of Laurence, but it was of Val Romer she was thinking

—Val, who had so bitterly accused her of shattering his idol.

‘It must be prevented, Di,’ said Mrs. Damian, under her breath.

‘You have this to go upon,’ said Lady Brereton, restoring the letter with an air of grave neutrality.

‘Advise me how to act, Di; you are so clever. That is why I came to you.’

‘Communicate the contents to your son.’

She shook her head.

‘You don’t know him. If he has gone thus far, it means he is in love—to infatuation—the girl has him in her toils; *I* could not break them.’

‘If you won’t move in the matter, I don’t see how I can help you,’ said Diana airily.

‘If the story was once known here,’ urged Mrs. Damian, ‘it would at least avert the danger I foresee of our own friends turning against us, and encouraging Ger-

vase in a ruinous *mésalliance*. The circumstances ought to be known.'

'Perhaps you wish me to spread them,' said Diana scornfully. 'Thanks for the commission. I do not think I am the person. And, after all, supposing the romance were in every newspaper and everybody's mouth, does it follow for certain that Gervase would be disenchanted, if he is so far gone as you suppose?'

'Ah, no; but it would tell, Di. It must bring home to him that such a marriage would be fatal, and cut him off from all his own friends. It would make him reflect, hesitate; then, if we could get him out of her influence, all might yet be well, I know. He is so impressionable. Every moment gained gives us fresh hope; but there is no time to be lost.'

'The story is sure to come out sooner or later,' said Diana, with provoking composure.

‘When the step is irretrievable,’ she retorted, almost fiercely.

‘If you are in such a desperate hurry to have the Countess’s letter made public,’ said Diana, laughing, ‘you should send a copy of the substance of it to Mr. Sparkleton, Bagatelle Club, Piccadilly.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Only that by next Saturday, or the next, or the next, all the world will be apprised of it; of that you may be sure. You know he is writing Mdlle. Therval’s life, in the form of a novelette, for his feuilleton the *Firefly*.’

And she turned away to arrange some flowers. Diana was one of those people of whom you never quite know whether they are in jest or in earnest; Mrs. Damian, one of those who, blinking nothing, rush headlong to the point—the crude thought, word, and deed.

Diana now glanced significantly at the

clock, which pointed to seven, and remarked that she and her husband had a dinner engagement. Mrs. Damian rose abruptly, made some rather incoherent excuses. Her manner was more flighty and flurried than ever: she bade Diana an odd and affectionate good-bye, and went.

‘She will do it, I verily believe,’ thought Lady Brereton, looking after her as she left the room, with a half smile. Then she turned, and let fall, half aloud, ‘My revenge, Mr. Romer.’

CHAPTER VI.

WELCOME.

THE scene is a lodging-house in Park-street; the time 6 P.M., the arrival hour of the continental mail; and the personage, Cherubina. Her mother has gone to meet Laurence at the station, taking Domenico. Those walls are too cramped for his boyish soul; indoors he is like a sparrow beating against its cage, only with this difference, that the damage done is to the perches and bars—that is, the furniture.

Cherubina has worked hard to brighten up the comfortless sitting-room; yet how dingy it will look to Renza, fresh from clearer, foreign skies! But the sun shines to-day for a treat, and Cherubina has recklessly expended the uttermost farthing of

her pocket-money in flowers to adorn the apartment. There is a fire, for Renza will be cold; a kettle singing on the hob, for Renza will be tired and ready for tea. Cherubina has thought of all these things; she is a careful little woman now. In Laurence's absence she has striven vigorously to fill her place, till she is actually beginning to succeed better than she knows.

And now a cab rattles up to the door. Before it stops, Domenico has scrambled down from the box; but such imps never come to harm. His mother is collecting packages and parleying with the driver. Laurence! The instant Cherubina catches sight of her from the window, she darts to the house-door, and bounds down the steps, to fly into Renza's arms in a demonstrative manner.

And the street was Park-street, the season May. Two young exquisites returning

from the Row were amazed and amused witnesses of the domestic scene. 'By Jove! what are we coming to?' ejaculated one vaguely; whilst some old ladies, wealthy residents of long standing, dismounting from their carriage in a deliberate and decorous manner at the opposite house, remarked regretfully that Park-street was not at all what it used to be; 'they let rooms to all sorts of people now.'

For the reputation of Park-street it was well when the luggage was dragged inside and the door shut. Further effusions went on in the sitting-room. It was a struggle who could talk down the rest, and the lot fell upon Domenico, who vociferated loudly,

'Muffins for tea! That's because — Renza, I *am* glad you've come home!'

'I say, boy,' put in Cherubina, perceiving how distracting was the uproar to

the tired traveller, 'help to carry the boxes up-stairs while I make tea.'

Domenico complies, nothing loth. Cherubina silently relieves Laurence of her wraps, and waits upon her with a tact and consideration that are among her new accomplishments.

'A year—a whole year since you left us!' sighed Madame, as presently they gathered round the tea-table. 'How little I thought, when you went off from Rome that morning, that it would be for so long! How miserable I was when I heard you were not coming back! But no matter, now we have you again, and that you will not have to run away for so long another time.'

'The *padre* is well, is he?' asked Laurence quickly.

'Yes, yes; never better. He looks older, Renza; you must be prepared for that; but he is quite strong again and

cheerful, and—' The rest was a kiss of gratitude and a smothered whisper, 'Dear, he has kept his word.'

'I knew he would,' said Laurence gladly.

'He is playing at Richmond, but will be back to supper. It has been a good season. O, there are letters waiting for you, dear,' pointing to a heap on the mantelshelf.

'Some with coronets on,' announced Domenico solemnly—'from duchesses!'

'You will be overdone with engagements and invitations,' said Madame; 'but I did not want to have you beset with business the first moment—not till you were rested. So I kept the day of your arrival a secret; I said it was uncertain, and have told nobody.'

A knock at the front door cut her short. Domenico rushed to the window, and shouted out,

'Mr. Romer! Now we shall be jolly'

‘Mr. Romer? Ah, I *did* tell him,’ Madame admitted; ‘no one else. He is one of ourselves; at least he has been every day to see us this last week. By the bye, Laurence, it is very strange, the only Roman friend who has not been pleasant to us in London is that Lady Brereton, you recollect, who was always so charming abroad. We met her last night at a party where papa played. I was rushing up to shake hands; she scarcely bowed, and turned away in a marked manner; so cool—insolent I may call it. Ah, there’s no trusting those grand people.’

‘I told you so,’ said Cherubina complacently.

But here Mr. Romer’s entrance saved aristocratic inconstancy from further censure.

Laurence’s first evening in England was a right merry one. There was much to relate of her wanderings that they all were

eager to hear. Her life had not been at a standstill these last twelve months. Val, though a man, and her senior by many years, felt in his conscience that, since they parted, this young girl had fought a better fight than he.

In due time Araciél came in, completing the family circle and heightening the general joyousness. Val stayed to supper. Midnight came, and still he was there, busy improvising a little plan for to-morrow evening. He would get together at his house a few of the leading spirits of the period—critics of repute, musicians of old standing—whose suffrages were important to a *débutante*, and to whom Laurence might be introduced with advantage in this pleasant informal manner. The clock, striking twelve, startled everybody; and Val made haste to depart. Besides his invitations which he meant to send out, he had two other letters to despatch that night—one declining the

offer for the Villa Marta; the other, concerning the yachting party, to Diana Lady Brereton, the last piece of his handwriting she was to see for some time.

Laurence and Cherubina sat up for another hour in their bedroom, talking little and fitfully, but hopelessly wide awake. Laurence was in a strange transition-state of mind. Was she the same creature who, when playing at the festival the other day, had felt the very springs of aspiration and achievement broken? What was it that had happened at Bleiburg, and changed the face of things thus?

When Gervase had come to her then, the delight of that meeting had swallowed up memory and forethought. She held out her hands to grasp that joy as the one thing to save her from sinking, from spirit-extinction and failure. How at such a moment should she stop to think of the gap she was going to put by such a mar-

riage between herself and her nearest friends and the old familiar life—the only one that knew her? Coming home had been an awakening, throwing light on the field before her, and showing it all in chaos and anarchy.

Cherubina was watching her eagerly and intently, thinking she had the key to her thoughts. But what she saw was the reflection of her own.

‘Renza’—she broke the silence suddenly, in a penetrating tone that startled the other out of her reverie. Cherubina, when she felt sure her companion was attending, said, ‘Could you ever love anything better than music?’

Laurence shrank, pained by the question.

‘Why?’

‘Because some day they will try and make you.’

‘Some day?’ Laurence echoed mus-
ingly.

‘Not some day; now—already! Ah, I knew!’ she burst out vehemently, and hid her face.

‘How?’ asked Laurence gently, bewildered.

‘I saw it from the first day. Only now and then I did not seem sure that you—cared. And yet, how could you help it?’

‘Whatever I do, darling, I shall love you always,’ said Laurence. She was used to the child’s passionate ways; but how should Cherubina have divined the secret? Was it written in her eyes that she had given away her heart and her liberty?

‘He is so great, so good and clever,’ continued Cherubina eagerly. ‘I used to think no one could be worthy of you; but he, Renza, is as far above other men as you are above other girls. I could give you to him happily—and him to you,’ she ended inaudibly.

A sudden light dawned on Laurence—a double light. It was of Val the child was speaking.

‘Mr. Romer and I,’ she replied significantly, ‘are good friends, and that is all; but it is enough.’

Cherubina lifted her head, and did not speak for some time.

‘He is so noble, so good,’ she said at last wonderingly, ‘and yet you could not love him?’

‘There is no friend I would sooner trust,’ said Laurence. ‘But now, dear child, if we sit up all night, how can I play my best to my judges to-morrow?’

Cherubina yielded to these representations, remarking gravely,

‘Yes, Mr. Romer said it was very essential you should make a favourable impression.’

The following morning at post-time Mr.

Sparkleton was the happiest of men. Val had bidden him to a select gathering of connoisseurs who were coming to Mr. Romer's that evening to sit in judgment on Laurence Therval, violin-player, only yesterday arrived from the Continent. In the fulness of his delight Sparkleton was ready to assume that the whole thing had been got up on his own account, to gratify his oft-expressed desire to know more of this musical celebrity.

'Very considerate of Romer, I'm sure,' he remarked. He was extraordinarily keen in the pursuit of knowledge on the point, for extraordinary reasons; and not for worlds would he have missed this happy chance of being among the first to make her personal acquaintance. He felt quite impatient for evening to come.

Val's house, hired at first as a *pied à terre* merely, had—not to mention the disadvantages of a central and convenient situation,

noisiness and cramped surroundings—that aspect of chill discomfort that somebody else’s house and somebody else’s furniture ever wear to the temporary inmate. But it looked more cheerful than usual to its master that night, though there had been no time for elaborate preparations.

Sparkleton arrived rather late. On the stairs a friend stopped him to question him about some nine days’ wonder just then in everybody’s mouth, and took off his attention for the moment. But his eyes, ever wandering about, glean- ing amusing trifles imperceptible to more obtuse senses, were suddenly and forcibly arrested, and he astonished his acquaintance by an involuntary exclamation,

‘Good Heavens! Who is that beautiful creature on the sofa?’

‘That? Why, Mdle. Therval, to be sure. Didn’t you know?’ returned the other lan-

guidly. He was only five minutes ahead of his friend in the information.

‘Indeed! Excuse me, I—I must go and get Romer to introduce me.’

Sure of his powers of self-recommendation, Sparkleton naturally had never any hesitation in asking to be introduced to anybody. Not many minutes afterwards, all the less favoured guests were confounding his assurance and envying his good fortune, as he sat on the sofa, chatting to the heroine of the evening as fluently as if he and she were old acquaintances met again after a long absence.

Every minute suggested something fresh for his monograph :

‘Mdlle. Therval speaks English well, but with a slight foreign accent.’

‘The resemblance to the well-known Raphael in the Sciarra Palace is very marked.’

Now Sparkleton flattered himself he

could be all things to all women; and it was his secret boast that, in the confidence of any fair stranger, he was only a quarter of an hour behind her earliest friend. But Mdlle. Therval turned out most unlike what he had expected. Flattery she deprecated good-naturedly. Familiarity she repudiated—condescension did not disconcert, or wit dazzle her and close her lips. He wanted to discover her weak point, and had rashly and wrongly assumed it to be—herself.

But the more she foiled and perplexed, the more she delighted, him. Love of novelty was *his* weak point. He had known so many musical heroines. To light upon one of a fresh stamp gave him a pleasure like to that of a botanist who chances on a blue daisy, a gardener beholding a black tulip. His perceptions, if not deep, were acute. Possibly he was one of those who, in the depths of their hearts, have *not*

renounced belief in the existence of ideal natures, for all the scepticism and cynicism of their tongues.

Only too soon, alas, did Romer come to lead her away to the piano. Sparkleton adored music; still, when the performer was a lady, he had only the minor part of his attention to spare for the performance. Well, he had talked for some time with the subject of his monograph—with Mdlle. Laurence Therval. Now to hear the violin-player.

The score or so of persons present listened with the keenest expectancy. Seldom does a young artist come to this island so brilliantly heralded. She had a good deal to sustain.

But the last few weeks had sufficed to bring about the readjustment of her powers. The old gray-headed musicians, with a disinclination to believe in any one they had not heard of forty years ago, were in ecsta-

sies. The serious half of the audience drifted, with Val Romer, into a rare enthusiasm; the non-serious, the Sparkletons, into a rarer respect. He had spent twenty years in studying human nature in general, feminine human nature in particular, and had thought the quality of admiration to be stamped out in him. Not quite. Laurence unconsciously had secured what it was exceedingly difficult to secure in him, a partisan.

‘Romer.’

Val, who was watching Laurence and her judges with a broad smile of satisfaction on his face, wheeled round with a frown, and saw Sparkleton looking *empressé*.

‘I want a word with you in private,’ said the latter.

‘To-morrow morning,’ said Val.

‘No; at once. A matter of importance.’

‘Impossible, my good fellow. I have my guests to attend to. We are going to supper directly.’

Sparkleton insisted — almost peremptorily.

‘Before Mdlle. Therval leaves the house. It concerns her, you know.’

Val stared. He was attentive now. Sparkleton, for all his flighty ways, was shrewd and practical. A matter must be important for him to call it so.

‘Come,’ urged the other impatiently, ‘there are at least a dozen old musical cronies pressing round Mdlle. Therval, waiting for their turn to speak. No one will miss you for the next ten minutes. I sha’n’t detain you longer.’

They stepped out on the landing. Val opened the door of a side apartment he used as a smoking-room.

‘Make haste,’ he said; for Sparkleton did not begin at once—walked up and down

the room deliberately; then, suddenly halting before his host, said,

‘Look here, I want to know about that girl and her history. You can tell me. Don’t try and make out that you can’t. And, first of all, just answer me this: Has she any enemies here in London?’

‘Not to my knowledge,’ replied Val guardedly.

‘For matter of that, all women have enemies,’ said Sparkleton sententiously. ‘I tell you she has—well, call them kind friends, if you like, who intend to rob her of social recognition here.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Val contemptuously.

Sparkleton was piqued.

‘Well, read that,’ he said coolly, handing him a rough printed slip.

Val looked at him dubiously.

‘Whatever you do, don’t fly out,’ said Sparkleton, who knew the sculptor’s hasty

disposition. 'We shall gain nothing by losing our tempers.'

There was ground for the caution. Val began to read what purported to be a monograph or biographical sketch. Sparkleton, with his hands in his pockets, paced the room carelessly, examining the books on the shelves, the prints on the walls, and the mantelpiece ornaments.

Val perused a sprightly introductory paragraph concluding thus :

'In Italy, Germany—all over the Continent, indeed—Mdlle. Therval now rejoices in a name so illustrious that he who should forget himself so far as to speak of her with moderation is likely to be branded as a raging Iconoclast. I should as soon think of robbing my friend of his watch as of an illusion, if he is lucky enough to retain one.

'Her origin is a mystery. Far be it from us to try and solve it. Why can't we

say of our heroines that they sprang from the foam of the sea? why not re-register their births as children of the Dawn and the Sun? It sounds more poetical than a parentage of itinerant fiddlers and acrobats. But even if she did begin life as a foundling, *Mdlle. Therval* is far too charming a young lady ever, at any period of her career, to have long wanted for protectors. Skipping the early, perhaps purely mythical, portions of her history, we find her a student at the Musical Academy of *Bleiburg* in Germany, where she distinguished herself in more ways than one, notably by remaining there for years disguised as a boy, and keeping up the mystification with success for some time. The story goes—we don't vouch for its accuracy—that, sooner than betray her incognito, she accepted a challenge from a peppery fellow-student, appeared on the ground, fought the duel, and came off victoriously, having

wounded her antagonist in the shoulder. The doubtful *éclat* thus gained did not deter the well-known violinist Araciél from taking her up. Under his auspices her public career began some years ago with brilliant success. Her industry is worthy of all praise. An iron will, in spite of the delicacy of her constitution, carries her through fatigues that would daunt an Amazon—'

'Why the devil do you give me this trash to read?' exclaimed Val impatiently. 'I've seen it all before, again and again. It's copied out of the *Petit Courrier des Dames*, word for word.'

'Yes, there's nothing new so far,' said Sparkleton apologetically; 'but go on, and don't be quixotic and all that, or I shall be sorry I took you into confidence.'

Val read on :

'Persons who do not know Mdlle. Ther-val will tell you she is not pretty. Some potent charm there must be, or else how

account for a life already so fertile in romantic incidents and extravagances? I suggest the following to any friend who may be wanting a plot for the libretto of his next operetta :

‘Baron M——, *nouveau riche, nouveau noble*, and a very good fellow into the bargain, well known in Roman circles, is the fortunate hero of the adventure. One morn he was missed from the Pincian Hill. It transpired that he had quitted Rome suddenly, leaving no clue to his movements. He enjoys the privileges of rich eccentrics—he can afford to do odd things; and his eclipse occasioned little surprise. It would be like him to go to America, or the moon, without leaving word. It was remarked, however, as a curious coincidence, that Mdle. Therval, at whose feet, it was whispered, his heart had recently been laid, had left her home and friends simultaneously for North Italy, to fulfil some musical engagements.

Conjecture was rife. The particulars of the romance transpired later, and right romantic they were. Like the hero of a ballad, Baron M—— had laid aside his name and pride to share awhile the lowlier fortunes of his *innamorata*, with whom he had fled in so mysterious a fashion.

‘The Baron comes of a musical family, and is well known as a singer in amateur circles. A bribe to the troupe of wandering minstrels to which Mdlle. Therval was temporarily attached secured his admission to it as one of themselves. So well did the knight-errant keep up his new character that, except to those previously initiated, his identity remained a dead secret. The troupe actually visited Baron M——’s palazzo on the Lake of Como, little deeming that its lord and master was among the party. Thus for some while they went roaming the country together in reckless guise. Adventures are to the adventurous—’

‘Gently, gently,’ said Sparkleton, alarmed, seeing that his irascible friend was going to fly out after all. .

‘What blundering scoundrel went and trumped up all this rubbish?’ asked Val scornfully; but something savage broke through his lofty disdain, and he darted a suspicious glance at the man before him.

‘The author,’ replied Sparkleton, unabashed and with dignity, ‘is a particular friend of mine, and the most conscientious writer I know. He never reports anything except on unimpeachable authority. By and by I will tell you how these facts came to him. Nothing was further from his idea than to displease Mdle. Therval. What motive could he have, man? Bless you, he was under the firm impression that she would like it of all things.’

‘What do you mean?’ growled Val sharply.

‘That it is not every artiste of three-

and-twenty who has a past like this, with matter in it for a novel. To have a hundred thousand people reading about you in the pages of the *Firefly* is a distinction that many women I know would sell their souls for. Notoriety is what they worship in these days. Don't judge people by yourself, Romer. I know you're above the sort of thing; but I call you an exception—an original.'

Val controlled himself with an effort. To try and argue with Sparkleton, or make any sort of impression on him, was like trying to throw salt on pigeons' tails.

'I have to thank you,' continued Sparkleton, 'for introducing me. I flatter myself now I know Mdlle. Therval better than most, and shall take pleasure in using my influence in her behalf against her enemies. This particular shot I have traced to the hand that fired it.'

'Whose?' said Val sharply.

‘Do you know anything of a certain Mrs. Damian?’

‘Damian!’

Val’s face clouded over. He was silent, lost in a hopeless maze of speculation.

‘So much I can tell you,’ resumed the other, ‘that I suspect her of being at the bottom of the affair. If so, I’ll ferret it out. Avail yourself of your old acquaintance with Mdlle. Therval to ascertain if she can throw light on the mystery. Then, this is the really important point: the *Firefly* wants information about Mdlle. Therval. To insure its being true, let her supply it herself. I put the matter into your hands. Speak to her before she goes. If there’s a plot against her, rely on me to defeat it. I must leave you now—another engagement. I’ve promised to show myself at a ball near here; but will look in again in an hour’s time, when your guests are gone, to hear what you have to say. Is it agreed?’

Val nodded and hastened to rejoin his assembly. Laurence was still thronged by curious admirers. Accustomed to quieter, less pretentious foreign life, she already felt the pressure of the moral atmosphere of the English capital severely. Every one was so eager and inquisitive and hurried. The master of the Villa Marta she seemed scarcely to recognise in such altered surroundings.

But the moment was not one for reflection. She had to listen, and respond to some dozen strangers all at the same time; but their fluent conversation, considerate manners, and undisguised approbation were so pleasant and exhilarating that her task that night was an easy one. After supper the guests began to disperse. The Araciels, who were to call for Laurence, had not yet come, and Val snatched the right moment to bring her back into the drawing-room,

now vacant. There was a statuette he wanted to show her, he said.

The minute they were alone, he forgot all about the pretext. Glancing round for the statuette, Laurence only saw Val looking very grave and brimful of suppressed excitement.

‘Mr. Romer?’ she uttered in surprise, breaking off in the middle of a sentence.

Val’s voice trembled a little as he said,

‘I am going to ask a great deal of you. I want you to trust me, to trust me implicitly. Can you?’

‘Can I? You know I can,’ she replied frankly, but wondering more and more.

‘O, there is need, believe me,’ he said. ‘You have no father, no brother, to do you service. That is why I am so anxious, why I would be both to you.’

Laurence lifted her eyes proudly, steadily; Val met their glance with eager de-

light. Perish mistrust from that instant for ever!

‘Remember our old childish days,’ he said; ‘remember that no brother now could be more jealous of your welfare than myself. So be angry with my question, if you like; but answer it.’

‘Anything you please,’ she said frankly.

‘What is the truth about a certain mad lover of yours, Baron Miramar?’

Laurence coloured slightly, and hesitated to reply.

‘There *is* truth, then!’ exclaimed Val hastily. ‘He did join your concert-party, under a false name?’

Still she hesitated.

‘You won’t speak. You won’t tell me how it was,’ he urged distractedly.

‘It concerns him, not myself. I respect him, and do not like to betray his confidence.’

‘You must, you must, Laurence,’ said

Val imperatively, speaking just as in the old days at the Villa Rondinelli. 'Trust me when I say it is necessary. Trust me with your secret.'

'There is no secret. Baron Miramar asked me to give up my profession and become his wife, and I would not. That was in Rome. He was passionately fond of music, and came to be one of us just for the love of leading a musician's life, he said. I agreed to keep the secret of his real name from the rest, on receiving his word not to speak of love or marriage to me a second time. One day he broke that promise, to tell me that if I would marry him he would leave his own people and life, and drop his title, and live as an artist among artists. I said it was impossible, for I could not. I did not love him. Baron Miramar is a good man and generous. He understood; I made him understand. He bears me no ill-will, but forgave me, and is content to

be my friend. Since then we have not met.'

'Does any one but yourself know of this? Any one who might set false stories flying?' he inquired.

Laurence raised her eyes to his with an expression he never forgot, as she said,

'It is for others, for those women who live quietly at home among friends and well-wishers, to ask what is said of them, if it is good or true, and who said it. They may trouble and distress themselves if it is bad or false. For us, who go out into the world, we should have too much to do. We cannot see to it. It is a price we pay for our success, and sometimes it is a terrible one. But it must be paid; and it seems to me that it matters only that the evil report, whatever shape it takes, *should* be a false one.'

Val was silent for the admiration he could not speak. After some time he said,

‘You are wiser for yourself than we are. Still, for the sake of your friends, at all events, you will muzzle the snarling curs this time—in this country.’

‘What do you mean? What can I do?’

‘Give me leave, or commission me rather, to see that plain fact, and no more, is circulated concerning you by authoritative people.’

‘I shall be grateful,’ she said. ‘But,’ she added, with a perplexed expression, ‘I still do not understand. How comes it that you—’

‘Can have a hand in it at all,’ he broke in, with whimsical irritation, fancying she resented his interference. ‘Take these papers, then,’ thrusting Sparkleton’s document into her hand. ‘When you get home read them, and then tell me, if you like, that I am meddlesome, inquisitive, and impertinent.’

‘Nay,’ said Laurence reproachfully.
‘And till now you were kind always—’

‘I am a brute!’ he said penitently.
‘Forgive me—I—’ He had a confession he
burned to speak, but repressed it. Another
time. ‘Now one last question: Do you
know anything of a certain Mrs. Damian?’

‘Something—yes,’ Laurence let fall, low
and tremulously.

‘Has she—could she have any cause of
animosity against you?’

Laurence turned suddenly pale. Quick
as thought, she glanced over the paper she
held. She grasped the substance. It was
as if she had literally grasped a sharp steel
blade, and she looked up with a changed
expression.

‘I am engaged to her son,’ she said.

She spoke on the impulse of the mo-
ment—in the pain of the moment—and
without heeding the effect of her words.

They ended that interview. Her guardians were there now, waiting to carry her off. Val mechanically put on her cloak, and took her to the carriage.

Presently Sparkleton turned in, according to his promise. More than an hour elapsed before Val was alone.

It was on him after all that the thunderbolt had fallen to-night.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VICTOR VANQUISHED.

MRS. DAMIAN woke one Saturday morning with her mind in a ferment. • There was reason for it. Ere set of sun, Gervase, now on his way from the Continent, might possibly arrive. She was consumed with impatience to see some first-fruits of her machinations, and was already pondering what her next step had better be. To undermine this girl's fatal influence over her son was all she lived for at present, and to that end all means were holy. The grand thing was to gain time; to sow, no matter how, the seeds of discord and distrust. So much, she thanked Heaven, she might reasonably hope soon to see accomplished.

The post brought her a copy of that

day's *Firefly*. She fell upon it with avidity, then stopped short. Who had sent this? It was addressed in an unknown hand. She opened it in haste, and was met at once by the expected large-print memoir, carefully marked out by the sender.

She read it through, with an odd blank look, like one who has broken his teeth on a nut, and finds it—hollow.

The leading facts of Laurence's public life were simply and accurately stated, without a word of impertinent comment, or the shadow of disparagement anywhere. Gracious powers! If her son's *fiancée* had been a princess from the most rigidly exclusive of German courts, this 'introduction' could not have been more deferential in its tone and language. No cheap flattery even; not a line at which fastidiousness itself could take exception.

Mrs. Damian tossed the paper aside in a pet; then put on her spectacles to look at it

again. Why was that paragraph underlined?

‘Strangest of all, perhaps, is it that she should have so few calumniators and detractors. But it must be a venomous nature, indeed, from whom her peculiar individuality would fail to draw the sting. So far, her only enemies have been such as knew nothing about her, either as a violin-player or as Laurence Therval.’

A distinct apprehension seized her. Now, first among her unread letters, she spied an envelope addressed in the same unfamiliar hand. She tore it open :

‘Madam,—The unworthy writer of these few lines of introduction, offered to a charming young artiste, makes no apology for forwarding them to you, as to one not uninterested in her reception in this country. He has reason to think certain facts have reached your ears, which have been traves-

tied into fictions. It will, I know, give you the sincerest pleasure to hear that they have deceived no one. The particulars of the affair I allude to reflect honour on Mdlle. Therval, and no dishonour on Baron Miramar, who was a suitor for her hand, and sued in vain. It is rumoured that another has been more fortunate. I mention this as it has helped to trace the mischief to its source.

‘Informants who wish to remain *incognito* should take better precautions. The statement, as it reached me, is now in the possession of Mdlle. Therval, together with the name of the mischief-maker.

‘If you desire that this matter should go no further than ourselves, let me suggest your calling on Mdlle. Therval, at — Park-street. She is generosity itself, and an appeal to her kindness might not be in vain.
—Faithfully yours,

‘CHARLES SPARKLETON.’

Mrs. Damian was aghast. This man, she had forgotten she ever knew him. Hers was a slippery memory for some people; but she had taken care to engrave herself in his by some social slight he had never forgotten. She was apt to offend people in this way, and in this case the victim was not of a forgiving disposition. Seldom in his life had he been happier than when writing that letter; but the effect far exceeded his hopes of revenge. She was stunned by his audacious impertinence, exasperated by her defeat, then sickened by a fear that swallowed up all other sensations. The weapon she had made use of—careful not to ask first if it were a lawful one—had broken in her hand; but that was not what troubled her. Her conscience was old and tough; and to gain her point in this instance, she would have gone by any crooked ways that promised to lead to her goal.

The matter was that she had failed, and

that her hand had been recognised in the affair. Even Sparkleton was far from realising what an awful nightmare he had conjured up by his last sentence.

Gervase and Laurence were in communication no doubt. He might arrive in England any moment, and possibly rush to her first. All might come out, and—the miserable woman turned giddy as she saw the portion she had fairly and inevitably earned. Hate, disgust, contempt, and entire alienation from the single human being whose affection was of worth to her. The thought drove her frantic, and would not leave her for a moment. Amy came fluttering into her mother's room. The papers and letters were thrust hastily out of sight, but not so Mrs. Damian's distraction. She pleaded a headache, anything to account for her inability to attend as usual to the business of her daughter's *trousseau*, which was detaining them in town. The

afternoon came, and she sent Amy out driving with Diana. Solitude was a relief, but only at first. She tossed about on the sofa, then paced the room feverishly, questioning herself. What could she do? Dared she wait—leave it to chance? Towards four o'clock came a telegram from Calais that decided the matter :

‘Expect me this evening.—GERVASE DAMIAN.’

A kind of panic seized her and spurred her to action. Sooner humiliate herself to Laurence, who knew all, than to Gervase, who was, and might yet be, kept in the dark.

Laurence had a concert that night, and was resting alone in the sitting-room, when a brougham, with the blinds down, drew up at the door. Mrs. Damian requested to be shown in, affirming boldly that Mdlle. Therval expected her. The chances were that Laurence, if she had the choice, would

decline the encounter. A figure seated by the window rose quickly at the startling announcement of the visitor's name.

Mrs. Damian had not thought the girl was so tall and proud and dignified-looking. During her drive the wildest hopes and conjectures had visited her brain. Gervase might have been accepted from mercenary or socially ambitious motives. All foreigners suppose Englishmen to be made of money. Gervase was not so rich as that. Perhaps Mdlle. Therval took him for a millionaire. His mother was ready to make him out a bad match, to prove that his position in society was not so very high.

But face to face with Laurence in person, she felt the straws she was clutching at were of the weakest. To be abashed in the presence of one so young was of course out of the question. But she was very uncomfortable.

‘You are astonished to see me,’ she be-

gan guardedly, anxious not to betray herself unnecessarily, but to sound the girl a little first. She had still a furtive hope that Sparkleton *might* have been amusing himself at her expense. 'I think I knew you in Rome; still I am probably the last person from whom you expected a visit.'

'I am indeed at a loss,' said Laurence definitely, 'to think what motive can bring you here to-day.'

'I know all,' said Mrs. Damian querulously, seating herself as she spoke. Laurence's evident wish to cut short their interview she was prepared for, and prepared obstinately to resist. 'All the clandestine communications you have been carrying on with my son, the ruinous engagement into which he has been drawn.'

'Has he told you?' she asked proudly.

'He has not dared. He knows it would break my heart.'

'*Your heart!*' repeated the girl, with scathing emphasis.

Mrs. Damian winced. Blushing time was long past with her. Laurence was standing, still. Her attitude, her countenance, puzzled and half-intimidated her visitor, who modulated into a minor key of lamentation.

'He is my only son. All my hopes are centred in him. He has always been our stay; and with his talents and advantages, he must, in due time, have risen to an eminent position. But he is impetuous, and it will be his ruin. The marriage into which he would let himself be—something checked her, and involuntarily she corrected herself—'into which he would rush blindly, brings the downfall of all our hopes for him, and for his promotion and distinction.'

'It is his choice,' said Laurence.

'In a mad moment,' returned Mrs.

Damian. 'A false step he would rue for the remainder of his life. Let us reason a little. I urge it in your interest as well as his. No good can come to you from marrying out of your station; and it would be absolutely fatal to my son's advancement in life. Are you bent upon harming him?'

'You, to talk to me of this!' exclaimed Laurence, half beside herself with astonishment and indignation. Mrs. Damian's eyes were running away from hers all over the room to avoid their scrutiny. 'What have I done to you, that you should go out of your way to try and injure me as you have done?'

'I am not aware,' she stammered helplessly, 'how I—'

'O, pardon me,' said Laurence, 'I know what I am saying.'

'It is useless to ask you to listen to me, then?' Mrs. Damian said at length, coldly. 'You are thinking—very naturally—of

yourself. From beginning to end I have had but one thought in the matter: my son's welfare.'

She spoke it as in self-acquittal. Like those who burnt heretics, and did it to the glory of God.

There was another long silence; then Laurence said,

'I have learnt something from this. You are right in thinking I did not know what I was doing at first. If this is what it means, if this is what his friends—what you—will stoop to, to prevent it, there is more to separate us than I could dream of. Do you think I wish to harm your son? He should know. You will not let him be judge. But I shall give him back his word and this letter; and it will make him feel, as I feel, that there can be no more between us.'

She spoke under the stress of the strongest painful excitement. Mrs. Damian

only saw one thing—that she held in her hand the tell-tale paper.

‘My writing!’ she gasped.

‘Yours.’

Mrs. Damian half shrieked,

‘Do not do that! Ask anything of me! I will consent to it—to everything—sooner than that he should have any knowledge of this.’

Laurence was silent with astonishment. Mrs. Damian mistook it for obduracy, and all other considerations sank into nothing under the pressure of what menaced her now.

‘I will do anything you wish. I will consent to your marriage—all, if only you will give me back that letter. If he knew, he would hate me; and that—that would be worse to me than anything that could possibly befall.’

‘Ah!’

‘I acted foolishly and blindly, on the

impulse of the moment,' Mrs. Damian urged hurriedly; 'but I did not originate what I tried to spread. How should I know it was false? Had it been true, as I imagined, I should have been justified in moving heaven and earth to stop my son's marriage.'

'Are you now convinced?'

'Do I not prove it?' she cried nervously, 'when I tell you I will give up everything—give up my son to you—without a single word, if you will promise—'

'Well?'

'Never to tell him, never let him dream of what has passed. It would kill me; for it would destroy his love for me. It is very little; but it is all I have in the world. Do not rob me of that—you, who have it all.'

Her despairing accent touched Laurence deeply. There was pity in her look now. The other caught at it instantly as a sign of relenting.

'Will you know more?' Mrs. Damian

continued eagerly. 'I will show you the letter I received, and that has led to the misrepresentations you allude to. The writer, whom you may know, is to blame for all, not I. Remember I was deceived by it myself, before you try and fasten everything upon me.'

She produced Linda's rambling epistle. Laurence read it through, startled and wondering. Suddenly she turned very pale, and grasped the back of a chair; the room swam. The shaft had been traced home.

'Do you know who wrote it?' Mrs. Damian asked curiously.

'Perfectly.'

'Can you account for her malice?'

'Yes.'

Her tone petrified her listener. There was a long pause. Mrs. Damian felt posed and a little awed. The expression of the girl's face had undergone an entire change. There was no shrinking, no resentment;

but no exultation either, no joy in her conquest just achieved. Laurence broke the silence first.

‘You said you wanted your letter back,’ she said, with forced calmness; ‘here it is.’

Mrs. Damian’s eye glistened suddenly. Laurence was holding out the paper, and motioning her to take it. She obeyed mechanically, scarcely daring to believe her senses. Then she broke out into some incoherent acknowledgments and protestations. Laurence cut her short.

‘I want no promise from you, no return. Say to your son what you please,—of him, of me. I give him back his word that he gave me. You were right. There can be nothing between us.’

Mrs. Damian never knew how she got out into the street, and into her carriage. She was dazed with excitement, and the intense relief of having possessed herself of her letter drowned every other sense. She

kept staring at it idiotically, grasping it tightly, till her brain cleared, and her agitation began to abate. Her mind and imagination were surprisingly agile. Out of danger, she saw the affair dwindling and fading already, and her foremost reflection was, 'Pity the girl was not born in the upper ten. She has the looks of a duchess, and the dignity too.'

She reached home, burnt the paper, and prepared to receive her son.

Gervase was crossing a blue calm sea, with a cloudless sky overhead, and favourable breezes blowing. Fair weather in his mind too. He beheld his life-prospect, and saw that it was good. Novelty has a potent charm for men of a 'certain age;' but it was no mere craving for change that had guided his choice. Rather the unalterable conviction of one who, having tried and found wanting many of the good things of

this world, arrives at last at the best. Ambition had been the key-note of his life; but ambition of peculiar happiness rather than of peculiar distinction, which, perhaps, did not lie within his grasp. He could gauge his abilities; they were not despicable; nor were they of the sort to place him in the front rank. A courtier, it is said, must be *sans honneur et sans humeur*. Honour apart, he had a will and a way of his own that were not invariably those of his superiors. Gervase had always been liable to turn aside to look at a pretty face. And when you come to the second rank, in certain careers, it becomes a question whether it is worth the sacrifice of your inclinations.

To Gervase it was now no question at all. He laughed to think how propitious the gods had been to him as usual. No human being could now interfere with his enjoyment of existence. A new future opened before him. A home,—a thing he had never

had in his life,—and liberty to fix it where he would. Rome, with its associations and liberal-minded, cultured circles, was, perhaps, the spot on earth where they would live happiest. All this while he was pretending to read a *Galignani* he held in his hand. Suddenly a paragraph caught his eye, and with it his attention :

‘Carlo Capponi, a notorious vagabond, died recently at Olevano, near Rome. In making his last confession to the priest he declared himself to have been the perpetrator of a highway robbery on an English *attaché* at Rome last year, a daring outrage that created no little excitement in the capital at the time. A determined Socialist agitator, Bruno Pagano, was charged with the crime and convicted. Capponi now confesses himself the real culprit, and an inquiry instituted leaves no doubt of the fact. Bruno Pagano contrived to effect his escape shortly after his convic-

tion—it was suspected by the connivance of the warders—and all search since made for him having been in vain, he is supposed to have left the country. His formal acquittal has been pronounced by the courts.'

The packet was steaming into Dover harbour; Gervase had barely time to read the paragraph through. He thrust the paper into his pocket, wondering if there were truth in the report. He preferred to see there a cock-and-bull story only. At all events, other more important matters claimed his attention at present.

Mr. Gervase Damian, it would seem, was in his way counted no less of an acquisition to the London season than Mdlle. Therval, to judge from the budget he found awaiting him on his arrival: the scented notes, in neat feminine hands, the pressing invitations, half a dozen for that very evening. He elected, however, to dine quietly with his mother and sister at their hotel,

then to look in at one or two evening parties. It would serve to beguile the time till he went to Park-street. Laurence, as he knew, had a concert; but he had written word he should come to see her, if only for a few minutes, when she returned.

He had a pleasant hour or two at the houses he favoured with his appearance; met a lot of old friends. Society, without delighting him—he was not young enough for that—exhilarated and agreed with him. Every one likes doing what he does well, and Gervase deserved to be treated, as he everywhere was, as a social treasure.

Still it was with a sense of relief that he emerged into the fresh air. Eleven o'clock on a warm night in early June is a time when artificial light, artificial flowers, even artificial mirth, are apt to fail and pall. The instant he was out of it he pronounced it a bore—or, at the best, boy's-play—of which he had had his fill. No matter; it

would serve to enhance the delicate pleasure of meeting her whose image seldom left him now.

Mdlle. Therval had not come in yet. Cherubina and Domenico were in the parlour; Gervase's entrance put them incontinently to flight. Almost at the same instant, the others drove up to the door. Madame Araciél followed the children upstairs, and Laurence went into the sitting-room alone.

She entered quickly, gave him her hands for a moment in silence, then half-turned her head away. The lamplight fell on her profile. Her countenance reflected none of the joy on his; it was full of grave, sad determination.

'Renza, Renza,' he said, with a sort of fond reproach, ill-content with his reception. 'What is this? Are you not glad to see me, child?'

'I am, I am!' she said eagerly. 'You

must forgive me. I have just come from playing. I am tired and confused. There, sit down.'

The excitement of performing was still upon her. She was fresh from an arduous task indeed. To compete with the recollection of the established favourite Araciel, fresh in every one's memory. Well, she had held her own, and proved her right to a place by his side. But, though artists may despise the English as musical judges, they will mostly admit their first appearances in London not to have been among the least trying moments of their trying career.

Gervase came and sat near her, noting with delight the wondrous change in her appearance. The fragility that had alarmed him at Bleiburg was no longer so startling; the old nervous energy was returning apace. Happiness is the real sorcerer, the philtre that can magically restore drooping

health. Bloom comes back in a day, in a night, quick as the burst of a southern spring. But her manner was strange; she kept her eyes from his, looking down silently at a flower she had taken from a glass.

‘You are looking your old self to-night,’ he said,—‘brighter than at Bleiburg. Old England suits you.’

Laurence shrank slightly, and dropped the flower she held.

‘Or no, I am sure you cannot breathe here,’ he continued; ‘one needs to be a native to find a London crowd or a London fog tolerable. You are a child of the sun. As for myself, I came into the world at Athens, you know, and have been spoilt for London life.’

He had picked up the flower she had let fall, with a playful movement of it to his lips. ‘I vowed I would see you to-night,’ he said—‘that the sun should not

rise in England, and we not have met. I have so much to say. Listen, Renza: in a few days I must go down to the country, for my sister's marriage. After that, I am yours—and mine,' he added laughingly. 'My country has graciously consented to dispense with my future services; that is all happily settled. We are free as birds, you see. Was I wrong when I thought, for the present, till we see our way farther, we should live happiest in Rome?'

She raised her eyes mutely. They could speak for her sometimes, but they were dumb to-night.

'Still silent?' he said. 'Renza *mia*, why this distant, cold, moonlight look?'

Then he forgot himself, talked again of his plans, dwelt on his eagerness to begin life with her in their new home. The child's hands were clasped over her face, but the passionate tears were stealing through her fingers.

‘Gervase!’

Her accent recalled him to his senses, and penetrated him with doubt and some dread.

‘We were mad when we said there were only shadows that parted us—shadows we had driven away. I thought the world could not touch us because we forgot it.’

‘What can you mean, Renza?’ he asked reproachfully.

The girl rose to her feet.

‘Does it sound to you like wild talk?’ she said agitatedly. ‘Well, it was my fault—my wrong—to forget what once I saw so plainly—’

‘You remembered you were my love, and I yours. The rest I give you leave to forget,’ he said playfully. ‘It is immaterial.’

Laurence was struggling with a double weakness: the feminine tenderness, the feminine bitterness rising within her, that

must be thrust aside if she is to be just to herself and to him. She managed to speak composedly,

‘When you came to me at Bleiburg, I was ill and sad. I thought I should die, or that if not, what lived would not be Laurence—that the Laurence you knew could only remain what she was by your love. O, it is dear to me, believe that. But I am not free. Something claims me—my people, my life, my work; I must not give them up.’

‘But I ask you to give up nothing,’ he exclaimed.

‘Ah, you don’t know,’ she interposed vehemently. ‘Do you suppose when I am with you I can think of myself, and what happens to me, or that I shall care first whether I play well or ill? To-night, after the concert, several ladies came to speak to me: they envied me, they said—they often say so. And every time that happens I say

to myself what they do not know, "For this I have given up being happy as you and other women are."

'No, no,' he persisted; 'you will be happy as they, only with a higher happiness. You will love better for your greater heart.'

'O that I could think so!' she murmured. 'But there is more than this. Since I came here I have learnt so much. I have felt the distance between us, between your friends and mine, your life and mine, and that it is impassable, Gervase.'

'You can say it quietly and coolly,' he exclaimed, stupefied. 'And in all this not a single thought for me. Is that what you call love, Renza?'

'You will be happy yet,' she said.

'Never again without you. Renza, what has bewitched you, that you can say these things and think I shall listen patiently?'

‘Our hope was a mad hope,’ she persisted steadily. ‘I abandon my vocation in following you. You break with those nearest you in joining fortunes with me. I have no right to turn back from mine, or take you from yours.’

Gervase was bewildered and uneasy. He seemed to feel the fair future he had set his heart upon slipping through his fingers. O, not yet, if moving heaven and earth could do it.

‘And you will forget me soon,’ she let fall sadly. ‘Perhaps even it will be easy for you.’

‘Renza, this is cruel,’ he said. ‘Will you talk of faithlessness to one who would make any earthly sacrifice for your sake?—you, who can consider and question, then coldly turn back, and tell me your love was a morning cloud.’

‘Never!’ she said firmly. ‘I have one

love, as I have one soul. But then—I am a woman.’

Gervase was silent, deeply troubled and perplexed. She was in earnest. A rock had suddenly risen between them; how, he did not stop to inquire—bent only on removing it.

‘At least, Laurence, you will hear me speak,’ he said.

She silently assented, and listened with downcast eyes and lips compressed, as he spoke, or his good angel spoke through him.

‘I deserve no love nor sacrifice from you. See me as the world sees me, and you do right to cast me off. I have frittered my life away when I have not done worse. Perhaps no one has been the better or the happier in the end for knowing me. But I was not meant to be so selfish and thoughtless as I have been. One cannot help some things; and I have been the plaything of a world I despised.

‘I had almost left off believing in good things and beautiful things when I met you. You gave me back my youth and my faith. You only can give me the happiness that I want to redeem me. With your hand to hold, I feel as if there was nothing I could not accomplish, no trial I could not bear. That is the feeling to meet the world with, love of mine. It cannot hurt you then by its sneers, or corrupt you with its smiles. Then, whether known or unknown, with your friends or with mine, in Italy or England, ours would be the best lot.

‘But if you desert me, Renza—if it was all a mockery—see what you do. You thrust me back into the dark ; you destroy my faith in your affection ; you snatch away the talisman that I need.

‘I shall not be selfish any more, with you. I should like to make your life perfect. Is it so perfect now? Are you so suffi-

cient to yourself that you can embrace solitude and be content? If you shut out love from your life, will you even be the better musician? Never believe it!

She had turned away. Sweeter sophistry was never spoken.

‘It was for this, then, you let me hope and trust?’ he said imploringly—‘just to deny everything at the last.’

Her silence wounded him deeply. Her resistance, whatever lay at the root of it, made him bitter. He had spoken so frankly and earnestly—tried, and failed. He rose. She faced him now—her lips were parted, her look was strange and blank—but he saw no sign of relenting. Ah, how proud she was, how ambitious! She could trample out love—for fame’s sake. In his excitement he spoke harshly, hardly knowing what he said.

‘Don’t fear I shall importune you now you have made your mind known. Be

happy, if honours can make you so. Perhaps one day you will feel what I learnt long since—that an immortality of fame is not worth an hour of love; and that will be denied you, as it is denied me.'

Still Laurence stood like a statue, her eyes fixed and tearless. Gervase came and took her hand.

‘Do you remember a day at the Piazza San Matteo, by the fountain in the garden? It seemed to me as if I first found you there. You have made me curse that day. Well, you have been frank, at least. Good-bye, then. It sounds strange even now. Good-bye. You have left me alone—alone for ever.’

He would have withdrawn his hand, but she held it closer, sank her head on it, her elenting tears. O, that life-
ch he had been the first to
wanted to go back into it, but
d cold.

She was sobbing violently, convulsed by mental agitation. He came nearer, put his arm round her protectingly. Even now she did not attempt to speak. It was enough—they stood silent, motionless, reconciled. The minutes flew too fast. Gervase had prevailed. From that moment he knew she was his own, whatever betide.

‘Answer me something,’ he said playfully, at parting.

‘I promise—’

‘When shall we go to Italy?’

‘In a month’s time we are going to a little house that has been lent to Araciel for the summer, near Naples.’

‘Italy — Naples,’ said Gervase, well pleased. ‘At a month’s end, then, I take your promise.’

CHAPTER VIII.

PERIL.

COME into the South. Rome, to tell the truth, is cold and stern and monumental, for all her splendour in ruins; so we leave her to the northward far, to escape awhile into a milder air and a softer scene.

Beyond Naples, fairest of sea-cities, lies a region stamped with an ineffaceable beauty, unlike anything else to be met with throughout the land of Italy. The picture is imperfect; for human nature is degraded here, and poverty festers in the hovels; but the great calm, the wide bright sea, the sprinkled islets and graceful promontories infuse gladness into us through our eyes.

July is over, and the vines are heavy

with unplucked grapes; purple figs drop from the trees; the ripe pomegranates are bursting open; the seeds fall out of the scarlet fruit as it hangs by the orange flower. The high-road is arid and dusty; the wild wayside blossoms are seared, the sycamore-trees scorched and yellowed by the sun. Autumn is there already; but down towards the Mediterranean stretches a wilderness of fresher green; a tangled underwood of wild fruit-trees; plantations of gnarled olives, with low aloë-hedges between; and here and there the ground slopes gently away to the blue water's brink, a stony headland juts out, and the waves wash round where the low pines dip in their branches.

A small house stands *perdu* somewhere amid a mass of luxuriant vegetation reaching to the edge of the sea-cliffs, that here rise high and inaccessibly steep. The house is invisible from both approaches, by land

and water, and hard to find. It is a mile away from the road, and the labyrinthine footpaths running between high stone walls with thick groves behind, whereby, after many wanderings, it may be reached at last, seem designed expressly for the purpose of misleading the traveller. It is called the Villa Incognita, and the story goes that, in the French wars, a fugitive prince lay concealed here for long unmolested, whilst the environs were being searched for him. The owner, a young Italian *marchese*, prefers Paris to this home of his fathers, and lets it when he can. Is it inhabited now? No one has been seen to arrive by the front entrance, looking landwards, where a trellised porch opens upon a courtyard adorned with faded frescoes; whence you pass into the narrow path by which the initiated will thread their way rightly into the high-road. Yet voices are often heard in the garden that are not those

of the housekeeper Teresa and her son, who have charge of the place—young voices talking in a foreign tongue.

Two came there from Naples one evening. The sea was calm and clear, and the light breeze just filled the lazy white sail. The friends who had gone down to the quay Santa Lucia to see them off smiled and waved their hands cheerfully to the girl seated on the cushions by the helm. Propelled vigorously by six oars, the boat was very soon at a distance, and the group on shore turned as sad as though those emigrants were bound for another continent, instead of a two hours' sail. Still they watched wistfully; the skiff grew smaller and smaller, till it was like a nautilus-shell floating on the surface. But the songs of the rowers, lustily bellowed by strong southern voices, reached them still in snatches.

The sounds died gradually, the figures

in the boat became indistinguishable, and blank grew the countenances of the four left behind, out there in the cold.

Araciél, dejected, looked helplessly at his wife. Up to this point she had heroically refrained from tears; but they burst forth irresistibly at his disconsolate speech.

‘We have lost her, Felicia. It is all over. Good-bye!’

Herewith Domenico fell to blubbing aloud. Only Cherubina’s eyes were dry.

‘Don’t be so silly,’ she said. ‘What does it signify, since she is quite happy—happier than with us? And there’s no use in standing looking into the water. Come home.’ And Cherubina, who now ruled the house, marshalled her parents and brother off to the modest tenement in the suburbs, where the family were spending their saddened holiday. Meantime the boat is speeding in the opposite direction.

Over the bay it came. Castellamare is

left behind. The scattered islands, Procida, Ischia, the Sphinx-rock, Capri, the headlands that break the coast-line, take all imaginable shades of purple in the sunset, then fade to gray. The rowers are coasting the shore, where the land lies level with the water's surface, and the voyagers can hear the murmur of the wind in the sea-pines. Along past clusters of fishermen's cottages, the outspread nets drying on the shingle, to where high scarped rocks, honeycombed with huge caves, rise boldly, and the boat is suddenly swallowed up in their black shadow.

Underneath is a private landing-place belonging to the Villa Incognita. A flight of stairs cut through the hollow rock leads upwards, and the new-comers emerge in a garden of lemon-trees. The scent of the spring blossoms here seems to linger on all the year round; the hot sun never pierces through the dark foliage; the cool

earth beneath is overspread by a tangle of trailing plants and flowers. Huge pumpkins and gourds cumber the ground, and a small unweeded path leads up to the Villa Incognita, buried here out of sight and mind of natives and tourists alike.

That was Laurence's bridal journey. Such was the intense seclusion of this their chosen retreat, that a month later the presence and movements of the occupants remained something of a mystery, and their name and nation a disputed point, among the village gossips. But often, in the early mornings, the peasants coming down from the hills, bringing fruit and vegetables to the market-boat, the dark-eyed donkey-boys on the way to their hiring-place, meet the strangers mounting the heights, and stop to remark to one another on the beauty of the signora and invoke blessings on the generous signor, who, out of his abundance, flings them *bajocchi* without counting.

On other days, when the sea is auspicious, the strangers sail over to Capri, skirt in their boat the cliff-girt isle of a hundred caves, or shoot beyond, to the strange rocks known as the Islands of the Sirens, a sea-birds' haunt, but otherwise desolate.

And in the evening the Sorrentine girls come down and dance the Tarantella, in the tiled kitchen below or the covered balcony above,—barefooted, wild-locked young creatures; and Teresa, the old *donna di casa*, sits by, like a Fate, and beats the tambourine, to aid their evolutions, with a saturnine smile on her lips. Or the idlers let the hours slip by in the *loggia*, under a canopy of vines, where a cool breeze comes up after sundown, fresh from the sea, of which there is a peep here through the garden-trees.

And the nights—‘not made for slumber’ too beautiful for that. There is silence in heaven and on earth; and it is pleasant to go wandering there in the garden-shade.

The dark sky is quite clear, the stars are big and brilliant, and the summer lightning glows in the west.

The sun had dropped ; there was an after chill in the air that night. Laurence drew her shawl closer round her as they stood on the cliff's edge, watching the fisher-boats putting out from shore, each with its tiny lantern in the prow, studding the surface everywhere, like sparks of the sea.

'*Amico*,' she began suddenly, 'when we leave this place—'

Gervase broke in quickly,

'Leave it! Renza, why must you talk of that to-night? Tired already of it and our time here together?'

'Hush!' she said, with a smile, 'and let me finish. It is a foolish feeling I have; but I think, when we go from here, I should like the sea or the lava to come over the villa and its gardens, and bury them,

so that no one should come here afterwards, and we have been the last.'

He smiled.

'Only I cannot bear to hear you talk of our going away.'

'Forgive me, *amico*,' she said presently; 'but the fear that crossed me a moment ago was that you yourself were wearying of all this. When the sun dropped, and the view that had been so bright before turned suddenly cold and gray, I thought a shade came over your face. Was it fancy?'

'No,' he said. 'Are you superstitious, Renza?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Nor I,' he rejoined. 'Still, these last three days—lay it to the scirocco if you will—I have been haunted by a depression. Don't look at me with those large frightened eyes; I shall make you laugh presently when I tell you. The dread that haunts me must be a dread of losing

you, since there is nothing else I mind particularly.'

'Gervase!'

'Yes, the idea takes possession of me; and then life becomes a misery of fear, the sun goes under a cloud, and my own happiness seems to be mocking me.'

'It is an evil spirit that is troubling you,' she said, smiling. 'How shall I charm it away?'

'Shall I tell you?'

She looked up.

'Come and sit in the *loggia* and play to me. That will exorcise the fiend, for this time, perhaps for good. You have not tried yet.'

She laughed. They sauntered back to the villa, and climbed a little outer wooden staircase, leading from the verandah to the *pergola* above. Laurence had not once touched her violin since they came, and felt oddly reluctant to take it up to-night.

He was importunate. Her music would spirit away the feverish fancies born of scirocco, as nothing else could do.

At the intersection of three narrow footways, a few paces from the villa, at the point where its apricot-coloured walls first showed themselves through the leafy screen, two figures were loitering in the dusk—a man and a woman—disputing in whispers. He was insisting on something obstinately. She replied at length, as obstinately casting doubt on his confident assertion.

Half-way in her speech she stopped short, as a penetrating sound broke on the evening stillness. Music in the villa, striking with a fantastic and unearthly effect through the solitude and night air. The pair listened motionless awhile, holding their breath. Then he spoke,

‘I told you so. A likely thing I should mistake! *I!*’

Linda made no answer. She leaned

back against the stone wall, moodily resting her chin on her hand.

‘Are they happy in there or not?’ he said tauntingly. ‘Does the thought of us out here, and others whom he has trampled down in his way, trouble his amusement? Such as we are do not count.’

Linda hid her face.

‘It is the way of the world,’ she urged helplessly; ‘and we cannot hurt them now, Bruno, do what we would.’

‘That was not how you spoke to me once,’ he returned, with a menacing look, ‘when you came to me in Rome a month ago, and made that scene. Recollect what you said,—that he was passing through on his way from England to Naples, to make that girl his wife, and that you could not live and see them happy together. You said you had tried to separate them, and failed. You had found out what I had kept from you, that he was the Englishman

who had sent me to the galleys; and you prayed me to help you to some revenge. So I should have done without your asking, but for the cursed accident that drove me from Rome, and has made an outlaw of me again. But it is not too late. We can strike here.'

She looked at him suspiciously.

'What do you mean?'

'He slighted you before,' said Bruno cunningly; 'he would do more now if he dared. He met you like a stranger, you said. Now he would thrust you away like a beggar or a thief. But you let it be, tamely, slavishly—turn the other cheek.'

'Bruno,' said Linda, in a harsh strained voice, 'do you want to madden me, that you talk like this? Let me go.'

'You resent nothing, you women,' he said roughly. 'You are only fit to be treated so—like playthings or lapdogs. Stay, then, and enjoy yourself in your own

way. You came to look on at his good fortune, I suppose? You are content to stand by meekly without lifting a finger, when you could spoil it for him, if you would.'

'How?'

'Show yourself.'

'What for? I can do them no harm. What can I say to him that he would mind?' she asked bitterly.

'I will tell you what to say.'

'I don't like to be a messenger between you,' she said uneasily. 'It is true you said you did not mean anything—no harm to him—but I do not believe you.'

'Fool!' he ejaculated under his breath. 'What can I wish him but harm? I am not one like you, to be trodden on and not pay it back. If I were you, I should know how to spoil his peace. For myself, what I intend is to extort from him, through you, whatever reparation I choose to ask.'

‘Ah, the money?’ Linda searched his face; the expression but half reassured her.

‘To get quit of you and me,’ Bruno resumed, ‘he would pay twice or thrice what I want. Try, and you will see.’

A *contadina* going home stopped to stare at the strangely-assorted couple whispering in the shadow of the wall. It was too dark for her to perceive the full discrepancy between their attire, else it would have puzzled her indeed to explain how the signora, staying at the fashionable and expensive hotel-pension on the heights, came to be discoursing thus familiarly with a man of the common people.

They hushed, and waited till the clang of the wooden shoes on the paved footpath had died away. Meantime the voices in the villa-garden caught their ear, the gay, glad voices of the lovers. Gervase, his depression gone, had risen to the extreme of high

spirits. A playful word, a little laugh, came to the eavesdroppers every now and then. They could follow their footsteps as they rambled in and out among the trees, pulling flowers and oranges; then lingering by the bush of white lilies, scentless all day, but whose fragrance perfumes the air nightly, from sunset to sunrise. Then a door shut, and all was still.

‘He will come out of the house again presently alone, by the porch,’ whispered Bruno, pointing to the courtyard, ‘and pass this way. Sometimes he walks as far as the village. It is your moment.’

Linda shrank.

‘I dare not,’ she faltered. ‘And why should I go? Just to make him hate me worse.’

He laughed, flung away her hand, saying, with bitter derision,

‘I knew you would play false at the last—knew you would cringe to your lot,

and why. By heaven, you women—you deserve the worst you get! Don't think to blind me; you love him still.'

'Love him!' repeated Linda, pale with anger.

Bruno cut short the protest she was preparing.

'Don't bandy words. Go to him, and say—'

He stooped to whisper in her ear. Still Linda wavered. Once more she heard their voices, coming now from the *loggia* on the opposite side of the house; something in those accents made her wild.

The sounds ceased. There was now only one figure in the lane; the man had disappeared.

Gervase came to the entrance-door, stepped into the courtyard, lit a cigar leisurely, and looked at his watch. It was late, too late for his accustomed evening walk into the village to the post-office.

He would just finish his cigar outside in the lanes, and then go in again.

He strolled a few steps down the path, and noticed a female figure on a stone seat at the junction of the cross-paths; doubtless an inmate of one of the villa-pensions in the neighbourhood, some English or German romantic lady, in search of moonlight impressions or inspirations.

As he approached she rose suddenly, with a brusque movement that arrested his attention. It was far too dark to discern her features, but a suspicion had suggested itself already before she could speak.

‘Good-evening.’

He knew the voice at once. For a moment he stood transfixed.

‘I am afraid I startled you,’ she resumed; ‘but have I grown so ugly that you start back from me as if I were a spider or a scorpion?’

Gervase, who had recovered almost in-

stantly from his first surprise, was regarding her distrustfully.

‘What are you doing here, Linda?’ he said gravely, but not unkindly.

‘I am *en pension* at the hotel yonder,’ said Linda composedly. ‘I suppose I have as good a right to be there as any one else. Or have you made yourself proprietor of the whole *piano di Sorrento*, and ordained that no one is to live or breathe there but you and your bride?’

Gervase did not trust himself to speak.

‘You would give a thousand pounds at this moment, confess it,’ said Linda audaciously, ‘to have me well out of the Naples principality.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said.

‘Don’t be afraid I shall ask for it. For my part, I prefer to stay here; I like the place immensely.’

Gervase was at the last extreme of tor-

turing suspense and perplexity. Here was an insanely jealous, unscrupulous, capricious woman, bent on mischief, it appeared.

‘I have an errand to you,’ she said abruptly.

‘You have?’

‘From my brother, Bruno Pagano.’

For the moment, annoyance, anxiety, everything gave way.

‘Bruno Pagano!’ he repeated, astounded. ‘Do you mean to say you and he are related?’

‘It is news to you, then, as I expected,’ said Linda coldly. ‘I too learnt first, a few weeks ago, that the English gentleman, thanks to whom the only relative I have in the world has been suffering false imprisonment, was—Mr. Gervase Damian.’

He was silent, his brow contracted.

‘Any reparation I can make,’ he said constrainedly, ‘you may tell him I shall be willing to offer.’

‘Some amends you can make,’ said Linda. ‘He is in trouble again.’

Gervase did not say he was sorry, and his brow cleared perceptibly as Linda added,

‘And anxious to leave Italy.’

‘Where is he now, then?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered hastily. A slight rustling in the trees behind the wall was heeded by her alone, and she proceeded: ‘He was implicated in the disturbances last month at Florence, and had to fly. His retreat he keeps secret, even from me; it is safer, he says. But we are in—correspondence. What he wishes is to get to America, where he has friends. He would embark the first chance he got, but he is poor to emigrate. Will you give him what he wants—two hundred pounds?’

‘What is his scrape now?’ asked Gervase.

‘Ah, you are afraid of committing your-

self,' said Linda dryly; 'but you may be quite easy. Bruno took no part in the riot; but he could not have cleared himself without implicating comrades of his. Will you help him now, or not?'

'I have no objection; but how is the sum to reach him—through you?'

'As you please,' she said oddly. 'You can think it over, and let me know.' She moved away, and seemed to be going.

'And yourself,' he asked quickly. 'Is it your intention to stay?'

'You have no right to question me, or interfere with my plans,' she retorted.

'None,' he said, incensed. 'I know you now, and how far I ever was from knowing you before, when I thought if you had one virtue, it was generosity. Be assured of this—that I care no longer what you do. Any mad action you may choose to commit will recoil only on yourself. For your own sake I desired that you should not sink

further than you have done. Go your own way, since you are bent on it.'

He was turning away. When it came to this—to his leaving her in anger—all Linda's fostered hostility forsook her and fled.

'Stay,' she said beseechingly; 'and don't speak to me so—don't look at me in that terrible way—and I will promise anything you wish—promise never to cross your path any more; indeed there is no fear I shall trouble you again. Soon I shall be'—the confession, 'married to Count Janowski,' was on her lips, but her brother had forbidden her to make it—'out of your way. But let me think that this, the last time I saw you, you still had a kind word left—for me.'

'Linda,' said Gervase moderately, 'I shall not think unkindly of you, unless you force me. It was on your brother's account you came here; he wants money. That's

what you came to say. He is welcome to it. That is my answer.'

Steps and voices were heard approaching—a company of tourists taking a starlight stroll. Linda slid away; she must not be seen talking to a stranger. There were hotel-acquaintances of hers among them, and she joined the party, and walked off with them. Gervase was left standing at the cross-roads, paler than when Linda had met him, and with knit brows. It was at least half an hour before he felt thoroughly master of himself. Then he reëntered the villa.

When all had long been still, the rustling in the bushes was heard again; then a scramble, and Bruno's head appeared over the wall. With low-muttered maledictions on its height he clambered down again into the lane. He looked at the Villa Incognita; the moonshine was reflected on the green-shuttered windows.

‘I was a fool to take a woman for an ally,’ he said. ‘Those tools turn against one. Why, the Englishman was round her in a moment with his smooth tongue. But she shall serve me yet.’

CHAPTER IX,

VENDETTA.

‘AT six o’clock I will be on the beach, where the ruined watch-tower stands. On receiving the sum I spoke of from your hands, I give you my word to leave here to-night.’

These words, in Linda’s writing, reached Gervase on the morrow. They threw him into the utmost perplexity.

He had to go over to Naples that day on numerous errands. Already he had determined in his mind to take this occasion of withdrawing a considerable sum from his bankers, to be available to hand over to Bruno Pagano, when and how it should seem most advisable. He was in a liberal mood; ready with a *largesse* for

Linda's brother, or any other poor devil who wanted to buy himself out of a mess. And, however averse he might feel to this second interview with Linda, he found anything preferable to treating with Bruno direct. The idea of having to make the *amende honorable* to such a fellow was absolutely intolerable to his disposition. It suited his pride better to offer the compensation thus, through a third party—like a government grant, a step involving no apology or personal communication whatever.

With regard to Linda herself, he felt inclined to believe she was tractable, and that he retained sufficient influence to induce her to leave the place, and leave him in quiet. If she refused—well, was not the remedy in his own hands, and simple? There should be no secret here. His best safety indeed lay in resolving to take no further step in the matter, except with Laurence's perfect knowledge and sanction.

But he recoiled not a little from the notion and appearance of being forced thus by a worthless woman into doing right against his will, or when and how he did not wish. It was like avowing her hold over the situation, whereas he believed himself to be master of it still. So sure did he feel of his power to avert the present crisis and the instant necessity of any sort of confession. The opportunity was good—on his way back from Naples; he knew the spot exactly. Where the massive bridge crosses the ravine, a steep pathway leads from the heights above to the road, and thence through the brushwood to a bit of lonely shore beneath, where a little martello tower in ruins makes a landmark, and serves as a shelter for fishermen taking their midday nap. The whole affair need not delay him half an hour. The moment came for starting for Naples, and found him still halting between two opin-

ions. Well, he would take time to deliberate *en route*.

‘Promise me something,’ he said to Laurence as they parted.

‘What you will.’

‘Not to go out to-day. Or, at least, not to stir beyond the garden. The sun is like a furnace, and the scirocco is blowing.’

She promised, and stood in the porch watching him, till he disappeared down the narrow lane.

It was one of those sultry mornings dear, it is said, to mad dogs and Englishmen only. Gervase, like a true Briton, went on his march unperturbed. Laurence was well content to spend a quiet day in the *loggia*, where she installed herself as soon as he was gone.

She wrote letters to Felicia and Cherubina; they must not think themselves forgotten; then, yielding to the enervating effect of the atmosphere, she abandoned

herself to pleasant idlesse, and the random train of thought that idlesse brings. She was beginning to wake from her day-dream; still, its brightness transfigured the future, which rose before her fancy as glorious and inviting as the paradise of Nature around her now. Last night she and Gervase had been making schemes—sketching out a perfect plan of life for themselves, and Laurence reverted to it again as an indulgence. It was unreal, but very charming. Not her old toilsome nomad career over again. From that she was parted—with a pang, it is true; but in one way or another she would remain true to her vocation; rid of the petty troubles and vulgar hardships that had been the flaws in her past course, she would retain the ideal part of an artist's existence only.

Time is nowhere on such a summer's day. Towards noon drowsiness and languor overcame her entirely, and threw her

into a siesta, from which she was half roused presently by voices at the foot of the stairs, heard by her confusedly in her sleep.

‘The signor is gone out for the day. The signora is up above on the balcony.’

‘Ah, I see. Well, I shall go up and speak to her there. Pray do not trouble yourself, my good woman, this hot day.’

The weather indeed was not encouraging to needless exertion. Teresa nodded, shouted out something unintelligible by way of announcement to her mistress on the balcony, and beat a retreat into the kitchen, whilst the visitor mounted the staircase.

The young bride, in a soft white dress, reclining there on a rude wooden bench, raised her head, and, but half awake, confronted the intruder—some one in elegant Parisian costume whom she did not instantly recognise. As the visitor threw back her

veil, Laurence started up, with an air even Linda found hard to brave.

‘Hush!’ warned Linda promptly, in an undertone, coming nearer; ‘your *donna* is still loitering about below. All the doors are open. If you speak loud it will attract notice, and these people are so inquisitive.’

Laurence had partly recovered from the nervous shock and the confusion of waking. She stood there like a statue, but her heart throbbed too violently for her to speak at first. Then she raised her eyes with a divine forbearance in them that fell on Linda like piercing sunlight and fire. It seemed to shrivel up her own wretched soul, and made her wish to sink into the earth.

‘What can you want with me?’ Laurence said faintly.

Linda was overwhelmed by shame and compunction. Her object in coming, though of the gravest, was temporarily put out of her head. What no amount

of argument and evidence could have brought home to her, Laurence's simple presence and manner at this moment forbade her ever to forget again. Had she not known it in her secret heart all along? This companion of her youthful days—Gervase's wife—was of another order of beings from herself.

Instead of answering she stepped back, made one vain effort to retain her self-possession; then her passion of remorse broke out.

'You should hate me,' she said excitedly, half sobbing; 'and you would, if you knew me, which I see you do not, or you would not speak so. O, you have cause!'

'No more than I know,' said Laurence, with an emphasis there was no mistaking.

Linda shifted her look uneasily, her eyes fell to the ground.

'I turned against you,' she murmured. 'I don't know what I wrote now, except

that it was all lies. I vowed that you at least should never become his wife. It was to be, though; and what was I, that I should prevent it?

She ventured now to raise her eyes timidly. Laurence had turned away her head, and was leaning against the post that supported the trellis, looking fixedly into the distance, where the sea broke through the dark trees.

Now Linda suddenly recollected her errand—it drove back her flow of penitence, and she resumed hurriedly, in another tone,

‘But I come as your friend this time—to warn you. Where is your husband?’

Laurence started, as if stung.

‘Take care, Linda,’ she said, in a nervously strained voice. ‘You have forced your way in here to tell me wild things, of which I don’t know what to think—how far they may be true. You shall not force questions upon me.’

Linda, distracted with impatience, began wringing her hands in despair.

‘Where is he?’ she repeated. ‘Good God! how shall I make her believe me? He is in danger, and I came to warn him, for your sake and his, not mine. What is it to me now if he lives or dies, loves you or another? But he is in danger of his life, and doesn’t know it!’

‘What danger?’ asked Laurence, in a terrified voice. Linda’s uneasiness, which was only too genuine, had struck her with a vague deadly alarm.

‘Tell me where he is gone!’

‘To Naples.’

Linda caught up the words eagerly.

‘To Naples! And he returns?’

‘To-night.’

‘By the high-road? Then all is safe. Safe!’ She flung herself on the bench, shading her face with her hand.

‘What is the matter? Tell me in-

stantly!' asked Laurence, in painful bewilderment.

Linda rose, glancing uneasily round the garden below to make sure no one was within earshot.

'Bruno, my brother, is hiding in these parts. He was imprisoned on a false charge of robbery, brought against him by your husband. Have you heard the story?'

Something Laurence had heard, but vaguely and long ago.

'It was a mistake,' continued Linda; 'and the truth came out the other day. It was hushed up, and is forgotten; but the grudge Bruno bears he will carry with him to his grave.'

'I understand,' said Laurence breathlessly.

'Last night Bruno made me wait in the lane outside the villa to speak for him to your husband when he came out. Bruno

wants money to get to America. Surely he has a claim to some compensation from the man who did him so cruel a wrong.'

'Do you mean it was refused?'

'No, no.'

'What is the danger, then? what does he threaten?'

Linda, at her wit's end with perplexity and shame at the thought of how she had been her brother's tool, began, as it were, excusing herself.

'Bruno forbade me to let out that he was here—he would not even tell me where he has found shelter—with some cottage-people, I suppose. And he says he only wants money from the man who has wronged him. But I don't trust him, or feel as if I knew what he means.'

'What do you fear?' asked Laurence sharply.

'Don't ask me.' Linda covered her eyes. 'If they were to meet—Bruno is

violent, unforgiving, madly revengeful. O Heaven! I don't know what I fear, but I felt I must come and warn you. In your place I should leave.'

Laurence was silent. Something in her countenance made Linda fear her testimony and sincerity were doubted.

'You don't believe me,' she sighed helplessly. 'O, but you might; and if ever you hated me, you need not now. I tried to harm you, but no harm came of it except to myself. And then how happy you are! You are his choice; you have his love and his honour; and I— When he saw me yesterday— I hated myself— He doesn't care enough to hate me—or he would. I am a miserable thing. Laurence, you might forgive me!' she urged.

'I do forgive you, Linda,' said Laurence, with a childlike earnest that sounded strange and yet familiar to the other. Was it Gervase's bride speaking, or rather the little

girl who had been her companion long ago? The tears were in Linda's eyes; she wiped them quickly away, and with them the transient emotion.

'Bruno must soon leave the country,' she resumed. 'If you will trust me with the money, and send it, I will see that it reaches him. But, for yourselves, promise not to stay here. Get him to take you away.'

'I will try,' said Laurence mechanically.

'And you will tell him that I came to warn him. Yesterday I was a coward, and dared not. I had just parted from Bruno, who was listening.'

'I will tell him,' said Laurence.

A little knot of flowers she wore in her dress had become loosened, and the wind scattered them over the balcony. Linda, with a sudden instinctive movement, stooped down and picked up a fallen spray. When Laurence turned she was gone—abruptly,

as she had come. Laurence sank her head in her hands. Was it a dream, what had just passed?

Linda, her anxiety relieved, her conscience appeased, began rapidly to recover her coolness and complacency, as she went on her way back through the shady lanes to her hotel.

‘How well she looked!’ she thought to herself. ‘Ah, it is work that wears. She has done right to give it up, as I shall do soon.’

It was four o'clock when Gervase, having got through his business, left Naples. The dawdling train, in an hour or upwards, took him the first fourteen miles to Castellamare. The railroad ends here, and he proposed to hire a carriage to take him part of the way home, and walk the remainder. It was growing cool and pleasant, and he was not sorry when the moment came to dismiss his shaky dust-raising vehicle.

The route was at any time enjoyable enough to be worth taking slowly. At every turn he met convoys of peasants leading long teams of donkeys with jangling bells, laden with sacks; dark-haired country girls, with fruit-baskets on their heads, many of whom had a smile of recognition for him, and a greeting and a courteous inquiry after the signora.

That is perhaps the finest walk in the world; and the world is a fine place, forsooth. Of this Gervase would have taken his oath. His felicity was too high-pitched for bygones to cloud and to blur it. It made him fearless, disposed him to defy Linda and her petty malice. As he walked on briskly, his rising spirits and self-confidence turned the balance. He made up his mind to go and meet her on the beach. He would use all his powers of persuasion to bring her to reason, dispossess her of any lingering inclination to tamper with his present pros-

perity and peace. For Bruno, he was ready with a round sum, twice what had been named, that should close that account in a manner gratifying to his pride.

Here was the chasm, crossed by the viaduct; here the rude side-path struck off; it was merely a dry water-course, by which little boys and boatmen scramble down to the *marina* below. Gervase had adventured the descent, with Laurence, weeks ago, and taken a boat back to the villa. The ascent was rough and toilsome, and Gervase trusted, when his interview was over, he might find some fishermen on the shore who would row him home; he would come upon Laurence by surprise from the garden.

The *marina* was a lonely spot at this hour, when there were no English ladies sketching the ruined tower or bathing in the creek. No better place could have been chosen for a private interview. Ger-

vase looked up and down the hill-side and along the shore, and saw nothing but a single boat, with a fisherman curled up in a sleeping posture at the rudder, too drowsy, fortunately, to come clamouring prematurely for the gentleman's custom.

Gervase was punctual, but Linda was not. When had she been? Still, this fresh sign of her inconsequence at this juncture irritated him. He would give her a quarter of an hour's grace, he said. As the minutes sped, bringing no sign, a great gladness came over him. He began to discover that nothing in him approved the step he had taken in coming to the rendezvous. He had yielded to the temptation held out by this chance of ridding himself offhand of a temporary annoyance; but he had done so in flat defiance of his judgment and his conscience.

Half an hour, and his patience was exhausted; he would wait no longer, but get

home at once and by water, as the easiest, pleasantest way. The recumbent boatman was awake now, and had for some while been watching the Englishman with the avidity with which foreigners, who are always understood to be wanting something marketable,—a boat, a guide, a donkey, or information,—are accustomed to be regarded by indigent Italians. At Gervase's peremptory shout, 'Ho, there!' he sprang up promptly, making signs of intelligence and pointing to his boat.

'To the Villa Incognita,' said Gervase briefly. He continued to watch the hillside, dreading lest he should see the expected figure approaching, whilst the boat was being unhooked and dragged down to the brink ready for launching. The water was smooth as glass, the breeze from the right quarter; it was an hour's easy row to the Villa Incognita. Gervase cast a careless glance at the unmuscular build and

slender back of the fellow he had engaged to row him, and calculated that he had made a bad bargain. But he knew himself to be a good oar, and well able to supply any deficiency. He felt in no hurry to begin work, though; settled himself comfortably on the cushions, keeping his eyes still fixed on the hill-side. The boatman, with his back turned, stood propelling the skiff onwards, gondolier fashion.

Rounding the point of the little cove, they were out of sight of the watch-tower, and Gervase fell into a brown study, lulled by the gentle motion of the boat. Linda's non-appearance, though he felt heartily thankful for it now, was singular and a little disquieting. He thought of a dozen ways of accounting for it, but not one that was perfectly satisfactory. His anxiety made him eager to reach home, and he soon grew impatient of the slow progress of the boat. The Neapolitan mariners are

no athletes. They contrast ill with the hardy mariners of Capri, who hold them in open contempt ; and Gervase's Charon was clearly of the least efficient: still the passenger felt too lazy to do himself what he had paid another man for doing well or ill.

'Put up the sail,' he said at last, in despair.

'The wind is wanting,' objected the other.

'Nonsense! There is what will get us along faster than those oars of yours. At this pace, I may reach the Villa Incognita towards midnight. Put up the sail, I say.'

The man shrugged his shoulders obstinately, and mumbled some sullen inaudible excuse.

'You won't?' said Gervase coolly. 'Steady, then, and I'll show you.'

He would let this surly Italian know who was master, and, by taking the law into his own hands, force him to obey. With an adroitness that showed early practice,

he fixed the little mast and leisurely unfurled the little sail, the boatman all the while pretending not to notice, till Gervase began hoisting the canvas, and shouted to him imperiously to take the rudder; whereat he muttered an oath, but laid aside his oars to comply.

‘Never knew an Italian object to put up a sail before,’ was Gervase’s comment. ‘The idle blockhead doesn’t know his own business, that’s the fact.’

The breeze was faint, but steady; they skimmed on quickly over the smooth surface, skirting the shore closely. Gervase’s boatman, hot and out of breath with his half-hour’s labour, took off his hat and fanned himself.

‘Lazy scoundrel,’ muttered the Englishman, glancing across at the steerer, who was watching him and his skilful management of the sail.

Gervase, though theoretically aware that

the brown-skinned, bare-footed thing before him, in a striped shirt and battered straw hat, was a human creature, had till this moment seen absolutely nothing there but a pair of arms he had hired to row him, and that did their work uncommonly ill. He now awoke to a sudden consciousness that it was a man, and not an automaton, a sentient, thinking being like himself. The features, hitherto partly concealed by the broad-brimmed hat, were now suddenly displayed, and Gervase was instantaneously reminded of her he came to meet. A disagreeable thrill of intelligence shot through him—suspicion appeared in his face.

‘Ah, so you know me—*this time!*’ said the steerer slowly, with unpleasant emphasis.

Gervase, with a *sang-froid* that galled his companion, replied, as quietly as if he had known it from the first,

‘You are Bruno Pagano.’ But as he

spoke, a sharp flush of anger overspread his cheek. A trick, a dastardly trick, had been played upon him. Brother and sister in league together. What was their sinister object?

‘It was my sister you came to meet,’ said Bruno sneeringly. ‘You may deal with me for us both. I did not consult her. The note—the summons—were mine. Our hands are alike.’

Forged—to draw him into a snare! Gervase half rose; his impulse was to pitch the scoundrel overboard. Perhaps Bruno had foreseen it; he parried it, saying,

‘If you upset the boat, you are an assassin. I cannot swim.’

‘Coward!’ hissed Gervase.

He resumed his seat and his work, without, however, taking his eye off his steerer. He retained to the full his presence of mind. He measured the man yonder, and with the pleasurable assurance that on fair ground

he could beat forty of him. At the first suspicious sign or movement he should detect, he was ready to resort to extremities. To swamp the boat would be a sure expedient. Bruno might sink or swim; Gervase could gain the land in a few strokes. Why, he could reach the Villa Incognita itself thus in a shorter time than it would take this fellow to row him there.

Bruno watched his countenance stealthily, and his next words were directed at reassuring his passenger :

‘I did not trust my messenger. You turn her round with your little finger. I wished to settle matters with you in person—it is safer. The promises you make to women, how do I know you will keep them?’

‘You want money,’ said Gervase haughtily. ‘I am ready to give it, as I said.’

‘How much?’

‘Two hundred was asked for,’ he said. ‘I will make it five when I know you

are in America. It will help you to go to the devil a little faster,' he added, in a lower voice.

Bruno murmured to himself, 'How generous is the signor!'

'I did you a wrong,' said Gervase presently, recollecting himself, 'though involuntarily ; still I am responsible for the error.'

'How magnanimous is the signor!' put in the Italian.

'And any reasonable compensation I shall willingly accord.'

'Enough,' said Bruno; 'you have done it already.'

Gervase showed his pocket-book.

'There are English bank-notes here for three hundred pounds. I will add to the amount with pleasure; but for that you must leave these parts.'

Bruno pointed over the bay to where a large vessel lay at anchor in the harbour, gleaming phantom-like through the mist.

‘The Albatross,’ he said briefly, ‘sails for Costa Rica to-night. After I have landed you, I shall still have time to reach it. I have friends among the crew who are ready to help my escape. Once on board, I shall be safe; but I am not secure for another hour in my hiding-place on this coast. The fishermen who have been sheltering me can do so no longer.’

He stopped a moment, and then added, with a crafty smoothness,

‘Do you not see now why it was necessary we should settle our accounts to-night?’

Gervase, though he winced at the over-familiar ‘we,’ felt enlightened and reassured. All now seemed tolerably clear. Bruno, forced to fly, and bent on getting his money into his own hands, had resorted to the nefarious expedient of feigning Linda’s writing, as affording him a direct chance of gaining his point without further delay.

‘Why did you not sign your own name?’ Gervase asked sternly. ‘I should have come.’

‘I did not know you would take the trouble to walk out of your way for me; and an outlaw does not denounce himself and his whereabouts by writing letters.’

Gervase felt at that moment as if he could almost forgive the deception in the satisfaction of knowing that he had heard the last to-night of the affair.

It was growing darker on the water. The breeze sank, the sail flapped dead; but already the boat had turned a point whence the cliffs under the villa-gardens were discernible at no great distance. Gervase, with an exclamation of impatience, lowered the sail, and, seizing the oars, began pulling vigorously, Bruno regarding him with a curious expression.

‘The signor is a better *marinaro* than

myself. He is more accustomed to boatman's work.'

Gervase laughed.

'My man,' he said contemptuously, 'your work is play to us. We let you do it that you may live. It will be an ill day for you when you force us into competition.'

He could not see the expression of Bruno's face at this moment, or he might have repented the taunt. Something like madness gleamed in the Italian's eye,—a treasured wrong, fostered antipathy, ending in the fanaticism of vindictive hatred diseasing the mind.

Every word, look, and accent of the Englishman stung him as an insult or a blow. Gervase, in truth, could not even now quite rid himself of the impression that he was speaking to a boatman. The ragged shirt, grimed exterior, and generally ill-conditioned look were characteristic of an inferior creature, if not the most servile of slaves.

They were now in the shallow water under the rocks. Gervase paused a moment in his rowing, to take out his pocket-book, and tossed it down on the bench, saying significantly,

‘The rest when you are in America.’

Something of rancour unappeased betrayed itself in the speech that burst from Bruno’s lips,

‘Ah, you will sleep the better when I am out of the country; confess it, signor.’

Gervase, with a scathing emphasis he could not repress, retaliated,

‘Do not flatter yourself. Persons like you may curtail my banking account, but hardly my sleep. Rogues don’t trouble the dreams of honest men.’

His words, or his manner of speaking them, seemed to have cowed and crushed Bruno, who made no retort and did not speak again.

Gervase was heartily sick of his com-

pany. The stupid fellow could not even steer ashore sensibly, but allowed his craft to run aground on the pebbles a boat's length from the land.

Gervase, with an imprecation on his awkwardness, drove the oar into the shingle to force them onwards. Bruno jumped into the water, muttering aloud,

‘The signor must not wet his feet;’ and began dragging the boat up to the beach, showing more strength than the other would have given him credit for. He was bending down, occupying himself with the cable, when Gervase leapt ashore, and in doing so found his foot slightly entangled in the chain. It checked him an instant. Bruno raised himself suddenly, as a snake springs. Gervase—

It was like a lightning-stroke. No cry, no struggle. A white, livid face before him, the gleam of steel in the uplifted hand, and a sound in his ears.

‘For myself and my sister!’

Gervase staggered back and fell on the beach, in the black shadow of the overhanging cliff.

Linda thought that night would never pass. Terrors of every sort, in every shape, haunted her unceasingly. O, to know that those two were safe out of Naples, and that instead of betraying she had saved them!

Laurence was waiting in the *loggia*. The roses were pale to-night, the stars dull, the wind trembled in the trees, and the sound was sad and dirge-like—a spirit singing her happy dream to its grave. All thoughts were swallowed up in a wild, rising solicitude. The night-voices whispered of dread to her as she waited, expectation turning to fear, anxiety, torture.

But Gervase lay still, there on the beach. The stars came out overhead. The sea-birds hovering near flew backwards and forwards

with harsh frightened cries. The bushes overhanging the cliff's edge murmured very softly, and the waves of the tideless sea plashed and rippled to within a foot of where he lay dead. The aim of hatred is a sure aim, and a Velletrano never strikes twice.

CHAPTER X.

THE VIOLIN-PLAYER.

It was Carnival-tide in Rome. On one of the last and gayest of its gay days, an Englishman was slowly wending his way down the crowded Corso.

He was a well-known figure in Rome now. Thrice had the Carnival—that merry herald of spring—come and gone since Val Romer returned to take up his abode again in the ‘city of the soul.’ That he has done well, his art-progress testifies. These last years have been the most productive of his career.

He is triumphant—over himself; successful—in his line; satisfied—in so far that he has stood both ordeals—of society and solitude — and proved self-sufficient.

Happy? That is another question. His outward life seems perfect enough. His inward lacks something, in its rigid concentration,—lacks that sympathy and human fellowship given to thousands to enjoy who are not worth his little finger. Carmen and Vashti are cold company, now and then.

He has an Italian friend with him to-day, a stranger in Rome, to whom the Englishman is enacting *cicerone*. Val knows every house in the street, and, as the procession of carriages files by, he can name the occupants of each as it passes, and point out the celebrities of art and politics and fashion.

Now it is a Roman victoria, too small for its contents—four persons, all of whom make frantically friendly gesticulations to Mr. Romer, and one of whom colours with pleasure.

‘What pretty English girl is that?’ asks Val’s comrade; and the sculptor explains.

It is the Aracieli family. They live at Milan, where the veteran player now holds an appointment. He has partially retired from public life, but makes occasional concert-tours. Now rolls by a private equipage, well-appointed to a fault. Perfection without pretension, every detail unexceptionable, in keeping with the couple within—the handsomest lady and sedate gentleman present at the Carnival show. They also exchange greetings with Val; formal greetings these. The simple Italian becomes enthusiastic:

‘Another of your countrywomen? Ah, this one is a beauty indeed. It is that Lady Brereton, is it not? I knew her from the bust in your studio. What eyes! *Molto di sentimento* there.’

‘Yes, in her eyes,’ returned Val shortly. ‘It has all gone into them, I suppose.’

The next is an open carriage in an opposite style, with a far more showy

exterior, huge coronet, and most conspicuous occupants. A lady, with intensely-coloured blonde hair, pink cheeks, and gaily dressed; beside her a gentleman, with a parched complexion, and hair that by rights should have been gray, but had been carefully restored to its natural colour of jetty black. The volatile Italian's curiosity was on the *qui-vive* again.

‘Who is she? who is she?’

Val, with a look of irreverent indifference, replied,

‘Eh! Linda Visconti, the opera-singer, don't you know? who married old Count Janowski. They say she lost her voice, but finds compensation for everything in her title of Countess.’

‘Janowski, did you say? Where is the Count's estate?’

Val shrugged his shoulders.

‘Half Poland, the Visconti will tell you, would be his, if people had their rights.’

But his rents all come from the gambling-tables at Monte Carlo, where he lives, with his Countess.'

Six o'clock approaches. The Corso is being cleared for the horse-races, the finale to each day's sport. Val slips out of the crowd with his friend, who bids good-bye to his *cicerone*, saying,

'I must be at the doors of the Apollo Theatre at seven, if I am to get a place at the concert. Mdlle. Therval's name is enough to crowd the house.'

Val, as the fortunate holder of a reserved seat, had time to spare still. Leaving the revellers in the Corso, he walked back to his hermitage—the Villa Marta.

The hermit is not to sup by himself to-night, apparently. Brutus has already received certain orders—to his great gratification; for Val, in the opinion of his good and faithful servant, is too much alone. How if he should become a prey to melancholy

and depression? Brutus had heard of a dangerous malady called 'Le Spleen,' peculiar to Englishmen, of which the symptoms were taciturnity, gloom, aversion to the world, culminating in a desire to cut your throat to get out of it. He has been uneasy about his master ever since one day, when he surprised him in a brown study before his statue of the Glee Maiden, and Val flew into a passion at being unreasonably disturbed.

Thus the prospect of a supper-party is cheering to Brutus. He has carefully prepared a narrow table in the sculptor's studio, grouped the plants and flowers among the marbles, as directed, and, pleased with the effect, naïvely takes to himself the credit of the arrangements. Val looks round, approves, alters a trifle or two, then turns to his factotum, with the serious question,

'Now, what is there to eat?'

Scarcely a Homeric repast; but Val agrees to the bill of fare, and bestows some further instructions on Brutus; then presently goes forth again, to stroll down to the old theatre by the Tiber, where, to-night, Laurence Therval gives her violin-recital, and makes her first public appearance in Rome.

For more than two years, indeed, the world has lost sight of her. It is only a few months since—when her name had not been heard for many seasons—she appeared at a concert at Milan, then at other places, creating, it is said, an extraordinary impression, the report of which sends all Rome rushing to hear her to-night.

Strange stories are afloat, stories at variance with each other, and mostly inaccurate, respecting her long desertion,—the romantic history of her marriage with a young Englishman of distinguished posi-

tion, and that tragic event at Naples shortly after, when he was found murdered on the beach by his own villa. That fatality was the talk of Rome for some time; but other startling events following thick, expelled it from men's minds; so that to-day three years later, those personally unacquainted with Laurence and her nearest friends have but a confused idea of the facts. Something of a mystery indeed has shrouded them for ever. The murderer was never discovered. Suspicion fell on a wrong-headed political blusterer, then under sentence of arrest, who was reported to have been hiding in the neighbourhood, and who might have been prompted to the act by motives of revenge. But Bruno Pagano had disappeared; and there was no evidence whatever, no clue, that could fasten the deed on him more than another.

Val had not seen her since; never, indeed, since a certain time in England, when

all his moorings seemed to him to be giving way at once, and he needed the sternest force of character to keep his course straight and his mind in health, and his heart from becoming disgusted with life and the world because he had been unfortunate in some of his experiences.

He wrenched himself away from all human ties, came back to Rome, and lived for his craft only. The beginning was rough, but he soon reconciled himself to the change; and it is only of late, when his mind has entirely regained its balance, and his art-fidelity and activity are secure against all attacks, that he has become discontented, and craves in his soul for what art cannot render. He can suffer solitude, but yearns more and more for human affection. In such moods his thoughts were apt to wander back to days long past, when Laurence and he were children together.

He took his place in the stalls that evening in a state of emphatic excitement. How will he find her to-night? Will she be changed?

Not beautiful, had they said? Val laughs. Ever more so, in his eyes, and in those of all who recognise its higher, finer manifestations. Surprise is one element of beauty, it is said—surprise that once made a dumb man speak. Half the charm of her face was in its delightful individuality. ‘None like her—none.’ But though her grave loveliness was unimpaired, there was a change, nevertheless; and Val’s first feeling of mere human admiration was succeeded by another impression—a sort of startled awe, as if before one who scarcely belonged to this world.

It was a relief to him when her smile came, half sad, but human; the smile of one who can still feel with others in joy as well as pain.

Val was no musical critic himself, but needed none to tell him how she played that night. As she herself could never have played formerly: it was more forcible, earnest, and pathetic. To Val she seemed to have added something to the divinity of music by her genius for its interpretation.

The clamorous applause in the theatre jarred on him. The instant the concert was over he got away, reaching home some time before his guests. Supper was duly spread. Val was in a queer state of agitation. Music had never affected him thus before. He tried to walk it off by pacing the studio impatiently, till the sound of wheels sent him rushing to the garden-gates.

It was only a detachment of his party; Señor and Madame Araciél arriving together.

‘She is coming presently,’ said the latter,

as Val helped her to dismount, 'with Cherubina. We drove on first.'

Val led the way into the studio, glad to get a few words with them alone. During the two or three days they had been in Rome he had failed to secure any private talk with them on the subject next his heart at this moment. And now he hardly knew how to begin. There was so much to ask, and his anxiety was so deep and wide.

'How is she?' The question burst from him hurriedly, the moment they were inside the studio.

'She is better,' replied Madame slowly. 'Better than once we dared hope to see her any more. You heard to-night how she played.'

'It is the music,' said Araciél, 'that will save her to us. Is it not, Felicia? She will live now.'

'Tell me about it,' said Val peremp-

torily. 'You must recollect how little I know of anything since—'

'Since that dreadful day,' rejoined Madame, paling at the recollection. She proceeded with difficulty: 'The news reached us at Naples. The thought of that morning, even now, seems to take away the ground under my feet. We could not believe what we heard; we flew over to the Villa Incognita, and found her—' For a moment her voice failed her, and she covered her face with her hands.

'We feared for her mind, Mr. Romer. The child was so wild with grief. She had fever, and was light-headed, and the doctor said he could do nothing.

'We had taken her away to Naples, where she lay ill for months. I think Cherubina saved her life. She nursed her,—never left her, night or day. The child was so fond of her, you know.

'When first she began to get better, her

memory was confused. Then her brain cleared. That was the moment we dreaded, Mr. Romer. It seemed as though, after all our care, she would only recover her senses to be struck down again, and driven mad by the shock. It was not so; but she sank into a strange languor from which she could not rise—a sort of death in life.

‘When she was strong enough we went to live far off, in the little villa near Milan, which we have since made our home. I went with papa on the tours. Cherubina stayed behind with Renza. For a year she never touched her violin. All her zest and enjoyment in it seemed dead.

‘There was an orphan child in those parts, whose story came to her ears through Cherubina. A little boy, with wonderful musical talent, but quite ignorant, and poor, and uncared for. She was reminded of her own childhood, when she was helped on by

the kindness of strangers,—you and your father, Mr. Romer. She made the child come to her, taught him, brought him on, till, in a year's time, he was able to compete for and win a scholarship at the Conservatoire, giving him a free musical education. What she could not have done for her own good, she did for another's. The reward came. Her pupil left her with her interest and love for art awake again. She played now to soothe herself. She went to hear music. Her place and part in it claimed her; she felt she must not hang back. When we heard her—the violin-player once more—we knew she was saved.'

'God be thanked that has given her back to us!' murmured Araciél devoutly.

After a long pause, Val observed,

'She still plays under the name of Therval?'

'She means to keep it always,' said Madame. 'And she has voluntarily re-

nounced all right to share her husband's fortune. The mother—'

'A crazy old woman,' put in Araciél.

'Made, or would have made, an attempt to question the legality of the marriage. It was sheer madness on her part, as no formality had been neglected. She had to retract, and plead ignorance in apology. But Laurence is proud and sensitive, and she will have no more connection with her husband's people. It is best so. Her friends know her history. The great joy and the great grief of her life there is no need for the world to know.'

Just then the curtain over the entrance was lifted, and two figures appeared on the threshold. The others, engrossed in conversation, had not heard the new arrivals. Val started at the sudden apparition; yet there was nothing appalling in it. On the contrary, it was a fair vision. Soft,

round, rosy Cherubina and her friend, as it might be Miranda and Ariel.

Val's hand trembled in Laurence's as he grasped it ; but he forced down his agitation, and was careful not to trouble her by eager, curious observation.

Supper, if a pretence, was at least a distraction ; and the host exerted himself to talk and make good cheer. Araciél and his wife seconded him well. Laurence at first took no part ; but presently her voice was heard with the rest ; and this meeting of good friends, if one of doubtful mirth, was at least not without its sunlight. Only Cherubina was silent.

Afterwards they walked out into the garden. The madness of the Carnival was at its height in other quarters of the town. From the quiet little grounds of Val's hermitage the far-off din of the revellers was fitfully audible. Some were hurrying to masked balls, others parading the streets in

every conceivable kind of grotesque disguise, and extemporising all manner of tomfooleries. The laughter, the shrill falsetto of the dominoes, snatches of burlesque songs and dance-music sounded oddly in the distance.

Now began a display of fireworks on one of the Piazzas. Araciél, having discovered a good point of view from the bottom of the garden, called to the rest to come and join him where he stood. Cherubina took her mother's hand, and drew her away; and all pretended to be interested in watching the rockets and coloured lights.

Val snatched the opportunity thus offered him for the *tête-à-tête* he so earnestly desired. Now it had come to pass, he felt tongue-tied and abashed. He had too much to say.

They were standing by a little column with a statue on the top. The base of the pillar was buried in a bush of Banksia roses.

Laurence stooped to pluck one of the flowers, saying,

‘These roses grew over the lodge by the Villa Rondinelli.’

‘The Villa Rondinelli!’ echoed Val. ‘Do you mean to say you remember it so well as that?’

‘So well,’ answered Laurence, ‘that I could tell you exactly where the different flowers stood in the garden: the heliotrope, the scarlet salvias, and tall white grass.’

‘And it is just as it used to be,’ said Val; ‘the red flowers and the pampas-grass and the stream over the rock-work—not a thing different. I saw it last week.’

‘Were you there really?’ she asked, surprised.

‘It is mine now,’ said he.

‘Yours?’

‘I have dreamt of buying it back for a very long time—I think, ever since the

day when it was taken from you and from me. Lately I have been in a position to make the purchase; and when the other day it came suddenly into the market, I was ready with my offer. A good place to spend the hot months in.'

'Well, I am glad it is yours again,' said Laurence heartily; 'to this day I could never bear to think of strangers there. All the time we were near, at Milan, I would never go over to see the place. It was childish, but I fancied I might find everything altered; and I have felt towards it as if it were my home.'

'Your home!' he repeated, almost involuntarily. 'Ah, Laurence—'

The expression of her eyes checked him. He shifted his look, saying abruptly,

'Are you not tired of standing? Come back into the studio.'

Brutus had cleared away supper and supper-table. Laurence went round, look-

ing at the statues one by one, Val watching her rather pathetically. He was of a tenacious spirit, and clung to old hopes and associations. Is there any order in this life, or is it a mere chapter of accidents? To what purpose, he often asked himself, had they two been thrown together in youth, and become no ordinary friends? The threads had been let drop, and it seemed to him sometimes as though, ever since, he had been trying in vain to gather them up. Wild thoughts and wishes were careering through his mind at this moment, but he dared not give them utterance.

‘My home,’ said Laurence gently, by and by, ‘so far as I may have one, is with Felicia and Araciél. I am rich in having them to come to when I want rest from my work.’

‘You divide yourself between it and them.’

‘Yes.’

‘You could not be happier—otherwise?’ he let fall earnestly, inquiringly.

‘No, not now,’ she whispered, almost inaudibly.

‘The sight of the old place,’ said Val, after a pause, ‘brought back all the old years. You don’t mind my speaking of them, I hope?’

‘I like to think of them,’ she replied.

‘I thought over my own life since then, these fourteen years, and searched for the key to it all. I found one in you.’

‘In me!’ she repeated wonderingly.

‘In you, whom for nine out of those years I never saw. But it isn’t necessary to have a person always at your elbow for that person to guide your destiny. Would you like to know how you guided mine?’

‘I had no sister, no mother. My best idea of a woman was a dear child such as you were, who made me ashamed of every-

thing in myself that was not good. When our great trouble came, the thought of you helped to bear me through it—gave me hope and courage. We lost sight of each other then, we had to go different ways, and even to myself it would seem as if I had forgotten you. It was not so, really. You influenced me still. Out of you sprang the ideal by which I measured myself. So when, years after, I heard your name again, heard of your playing and success, I said, "It must have been so. She was true and constant."

He stopped, and resumed, in another key,

'When we met next time, I seemed prosperous myself; but I was on the brink of getting spoilt. A little more, and I should have been one of those fellows of whom people say, "He might have done anything—he will do nothing more." Then, again, the picture before me of you, pure and

faithful and devoted, helped me to open my eyes, and break away from a temptation that was making me untrue to myself. All women are not good angels—'

He broke off; then raised his eyes appealingly, with a half-humorous glance lurking underneath, saying quaintly,

'At least I am nobody's slave to-day; and I haven't sold my soul to the devil.'

The gleam of drollery passed, to give place to an expression that surprised Laurence. Val grave? Val melancholy? There was no mistaking the mournfulness of his face at this moment.

'But the break left me a lonely man,' he said. 'And I suppose it is my doom to remain so always.'

Her eyes rested on his compassionately.

'So that now and then,' he continued, 'I ask myself whether what I've done is worth the price. My name is in the papers; great people come to stare at me and my

studio; my statues fetch large sums, and so on. But the other day I saw a peasant-fellow in the Campagna, who was going to church in his Sunday clothes, with a broad grin on his face. He had wooed and won the *contadina* he had chosen, and envied nobody. But I envied him.'

Laurence listened. A smile was on her lips as he concluded; she cast a quick glance round the studio, saying significantly,

'Yes, it is worth.'

Val looked about doubtfully, still gloomy and downcast.

'I suppose I want too much, then,' he said; 'for I tell you seriously that such a life as mine is not worth having. Not to be loved is so dreary.'

'Not to be loved!' she repeated. 'Ah, how little you know!'

'Laurence!'

'Val!'—She caught him up quickly;

the earnest sadness in her eyes slew his bold rash hope almost before it sprang into existence. She resumed quietly,

‘What I am thinking of does not concern myself. For me, all that—what you mean by it—is past and buried. I carry it in my heart. It is not dead.’

She was looking before her fixedly, as though at something—something he could not see—as she said,

‘I think the human part of me died when he died. It is a spirit-life I lead now. It is the only one for me. But you, Val—’

Her tone softened. She laid her hand on his arm, saying delicately,

‘If I were you, I should not look far to find the one who would love me as one would like best to be loved.’

Val’s wits had gone astray. He looked at her vacantly and stupidly. Laurence laughed to herself.

‘Our own life, Val, is ruled by our

art. You have learnt it. I have learnt it. Whatever happens, it claims all we can give it. Our work is stronger than our will. It draws us.'

Her face was idealised by its intensity of expression. Val could have knelt to her; and it seemed a profanity to offer her his love. Yet, perhaps she read his thoughts, as she pursued:

'In a woman's life love is all or nothing. Mine was taken away from me, you know.'

She drooped her head, and let fall to herself,

'God sent love that we might believe in another world, where it shall be continued and made perfect.'

'How pale you are, Laurence!' said Val suddenly.

'I cannot breathe,' she said. 'Come into the open air.'

He led her into the garden. She re-

covered herself quickly, and said, noting his uneasy look,

‘Do not be anxious about me. I am well now. *She* saved my life.’

Cherubina had strayed away from her parents, and was then seated on the steps of the pillar’s base, by the rosebush.

‘There is one,’ said Laurence, ‘who knows what love is; none better. She loves me; and for me would give away her own dearest hope willingly, and find her happiness in seeing that of those dearer to her than herself.’

Laurence spoke significantly. Val rubbed his forehead. A light crossed him. A new light, and yet—and yet, in the depths of his consciousness, had it *never* penetrated before? He could not have sworn it.

‘Cherubina!’ he muttered. ‘I always thought her a child.’

‘You were wrong,’ said Laurence.

‘What is she doing?’ said Val curiously.

Cherubina was bending anxiously over something she was scrutinising in the starlight; and Laurence laughed,

‘I know.’

‘Picking my flowers to pieces, eh?’ said Val, amused. ‘That poor rose of mine has done her no harm; why should she dissect it like that?’

He pretended ignorance, but hardly needed Laurence’s half-whispered word of enlightenment to tell him that his rose was the oracle whence Cherubina was trying to divine her fate. ‘He loves me—loves me not.’ Leaf after leaf fluttered away in the breeze.

It had come right, apparently; for Cherubina’s face lit up with smiles. Then, vexed with herself for her folly, she flung the stalk from her, and hid her face in her hands. Then she heard Laurence’s voice calling her.

Cherubina started up, and came flying towards them, her cheeks crimson with confusion. It was dreadful to think she might have been seen at her silly sport just now. But Val and Laurence were discreet. Their faces told no tales.

‘Cherubina,’ said Laurence, ‘should we not be going home soon?’

She laid her hand on the child’s arm. The colour died away from the valiant little girl’s cheeks as she faced those two.

‘Yes, it is time,’ she said quietly. ‘You go back into the studio. I will call the others.’

She would have stood by and seen their love, had things been so, and ministered to it and to them, and been content.

Val was touched. He let Laurence talk to him of Cherubina, and elicit the admission that, supposing, just for argument’s sake, he wanted to marry at all, there was

no one, who would have him, whom he inclined to more.

‘You will love her dearly,’ said Laurence; ‘and not be alone again.’

‘But you?’ he said.

Her hand rested on her violin-case. In there lay her only life-companion. He understood.

Laurence’s words were fulfilled. If, some months later, Cherubina was the happiest of girls, it was Cherubina who, when months became years, Val must admit to have made him the happiest of men. There is not a more lovable or more devoted wife in Italy, nor, it must be added, a prettier one. She has become perfectly indispensable to Val’s existence—a fact which suffices to her own content; and the one thing the sculptor cannot understand now is, how he ever got on at all as a bachelor.

Laurence is not separated from them,

though her life is apart. They are all one family, meet often, and the bond of union between her and Val is of the strongest. But her own love-dream is past, and she wanders through the world again alone, with a loyal old comrade—her violin.

THE END.

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